

DC COMICS
VERTIGO

Book 1 of 3

Destiny

A Chronicle of Deaths Foretold

Alisa
Kwitney

+

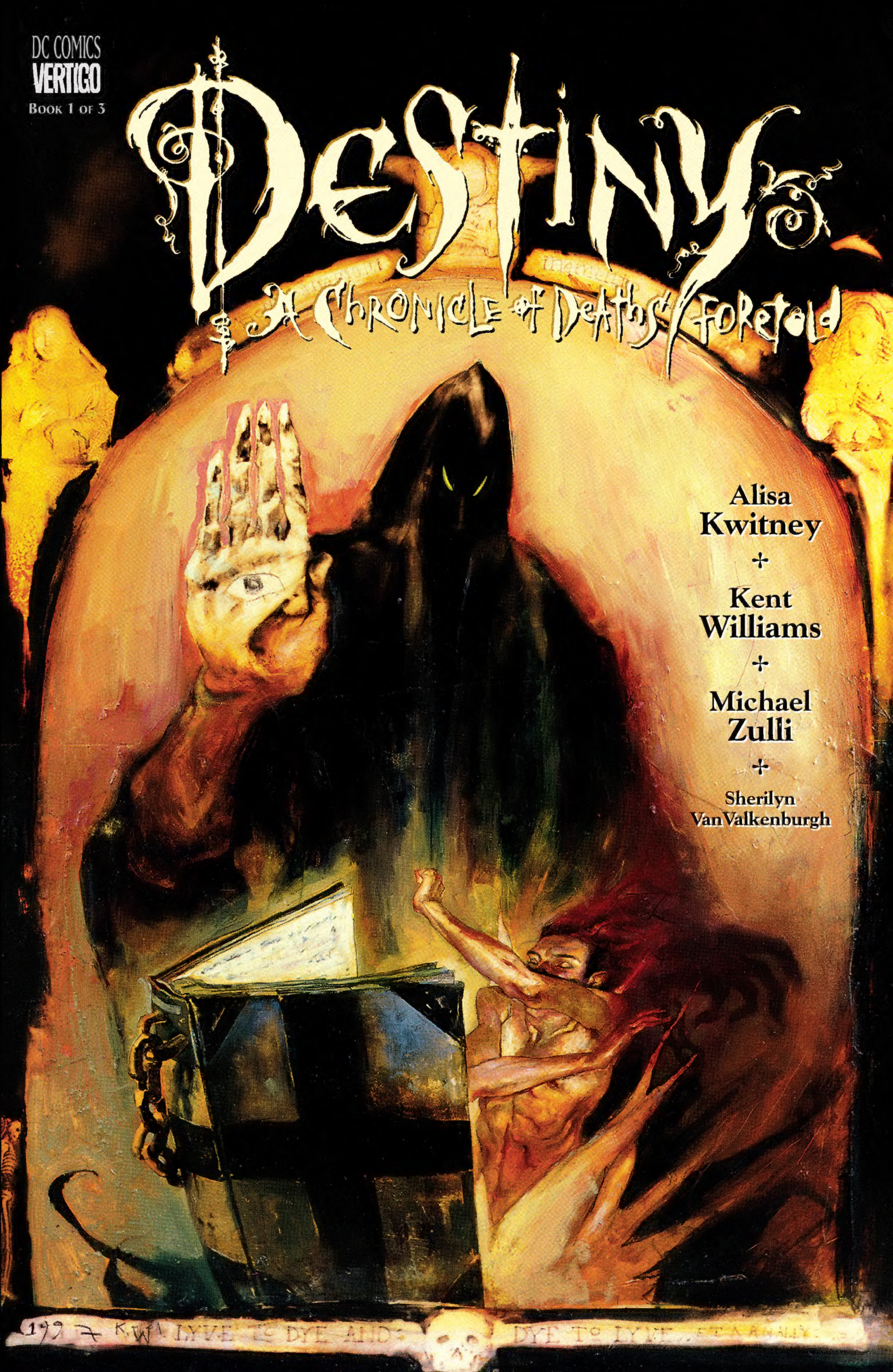
Kent
Williams

+

Michael
Zulli

+

Sherilyn
Van Valkenburgh



1997 K.W.I. LIVE TO DYE AND

DYE TO LIVE. ET AL.

BOOK ONE: BYZANTIUM

DESTINY

A CHRONICLE OF DEATHS FORETOLD



Alisa Kwitney

Writer

Kent Williams

Painter + Framing Sequence

Michael Zulli

Artist + Byzantium Sequence

Sherilyn Van Valkenburgh

Color Artist + Byzantium Sequence

Todd Klein

Letterer



"He knew...that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city."
--Albert Camus, THE PLAGUE

DIE
TO
REMEMBER



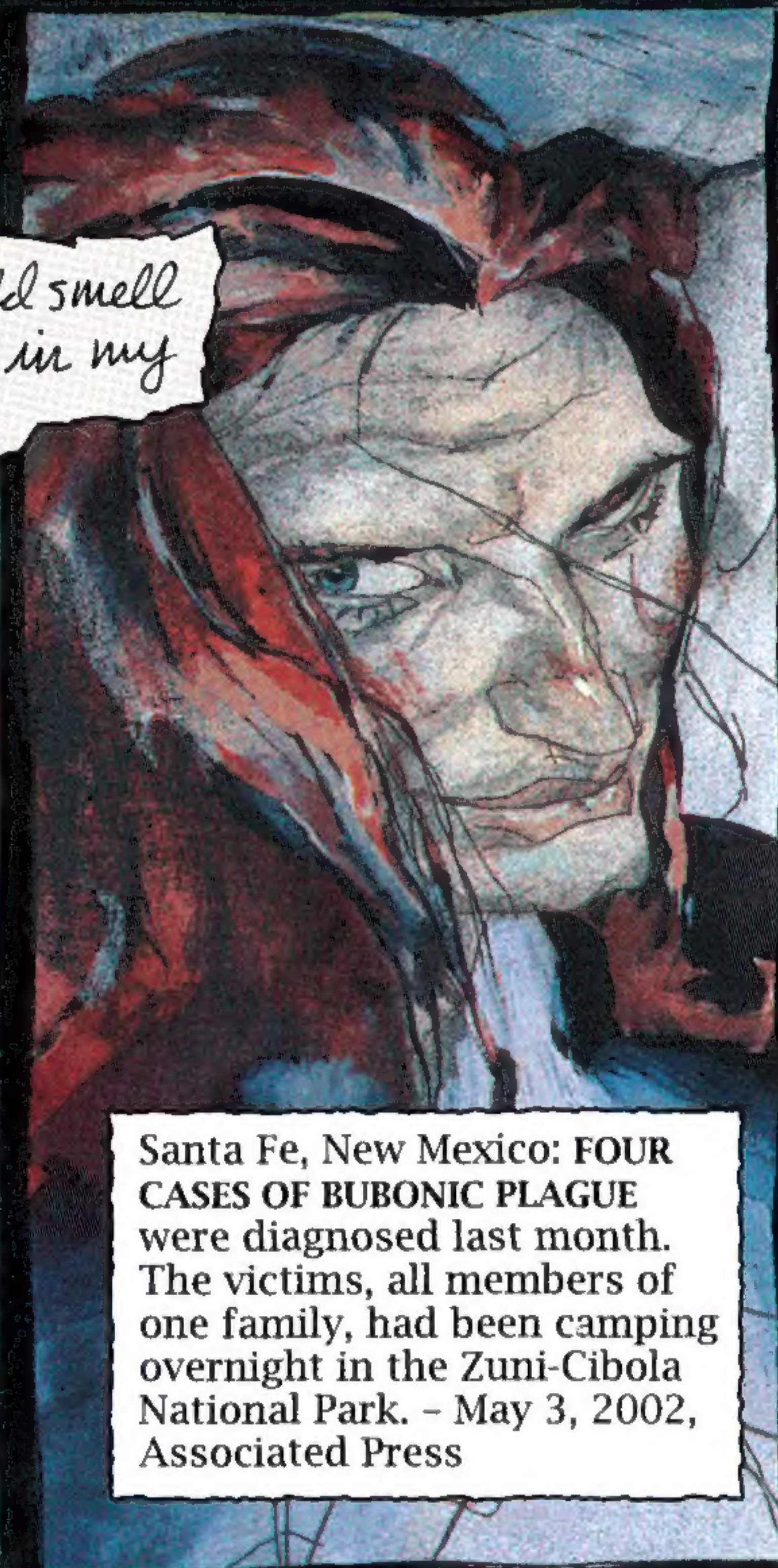
THE WORLD WILL END IN THE YEAR 2000!

It's true, says Ravi Mukerji, a renowned psychic. "There are ancient writings belonging to many different cultures that all predict a day of divine judgment at the close of the second millennium," says Ravi - and by our reckoning, that's January 1st of the year 2000, less than two months from today! - The Weekly Grapevine November 5th, 1999

OCTOBER 22, 2009:
FROM THE JOURNAL
OF RUTH KNIGHT:

*They say you smell a
strange, sweet odor
right before the end.*

"Well, it's two minutes past
midnight here at the biggest New
Year's Eve party of all time and I
am happy to report the Apocalypse
hasn't happened yet." -Alan
Morgan, reporting live from Times
Square, January 1st, 2000



*I could smell
lilacs in my
room.*



Santa Fe, New Mexico: **FOUR
CASES OF BUBONIC PLAGUE**
were diagnosed last month.
The victims, all members of
one family, had been camping
overnight in the Zuni-Cibola
National Park. - May 3, 2002,
Associated Press

*But I knew I
wasn't dying.*

As a safety precaution, children in certain school precincts are being urged to remain home, pending investigation of three new reported cases of the new antibiotic-resistant strain of the plague. -- June 12, 2002, *The New York Times*



I was dreaming.

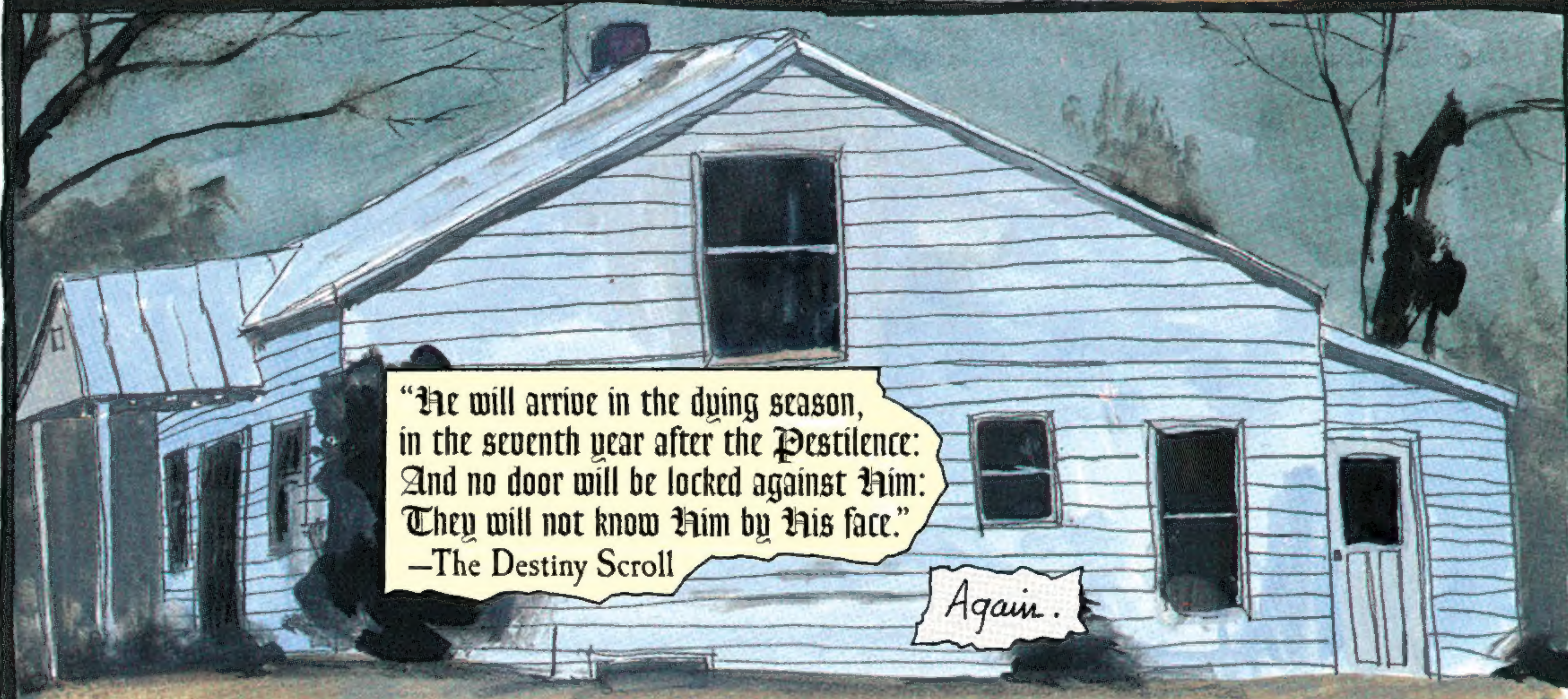
THE BLACK DEATH RETURNS

Over 1,000 Dead in New York City Alone -- 35 Confirmed Cases in London

While some individuals are keeping to their houses here and stockpiling supplies, others are taking to the streets and indulging in carnival-like displays of uninhibited behaviour. --August 7, 2002, *London, The Times*



In my dream the plague was coming to my house.



"He will arrive in the dying season, in the seventh year after the Pestilence: And no door will be locked against him: They will not know him by his face."
--The Destiny Scroll

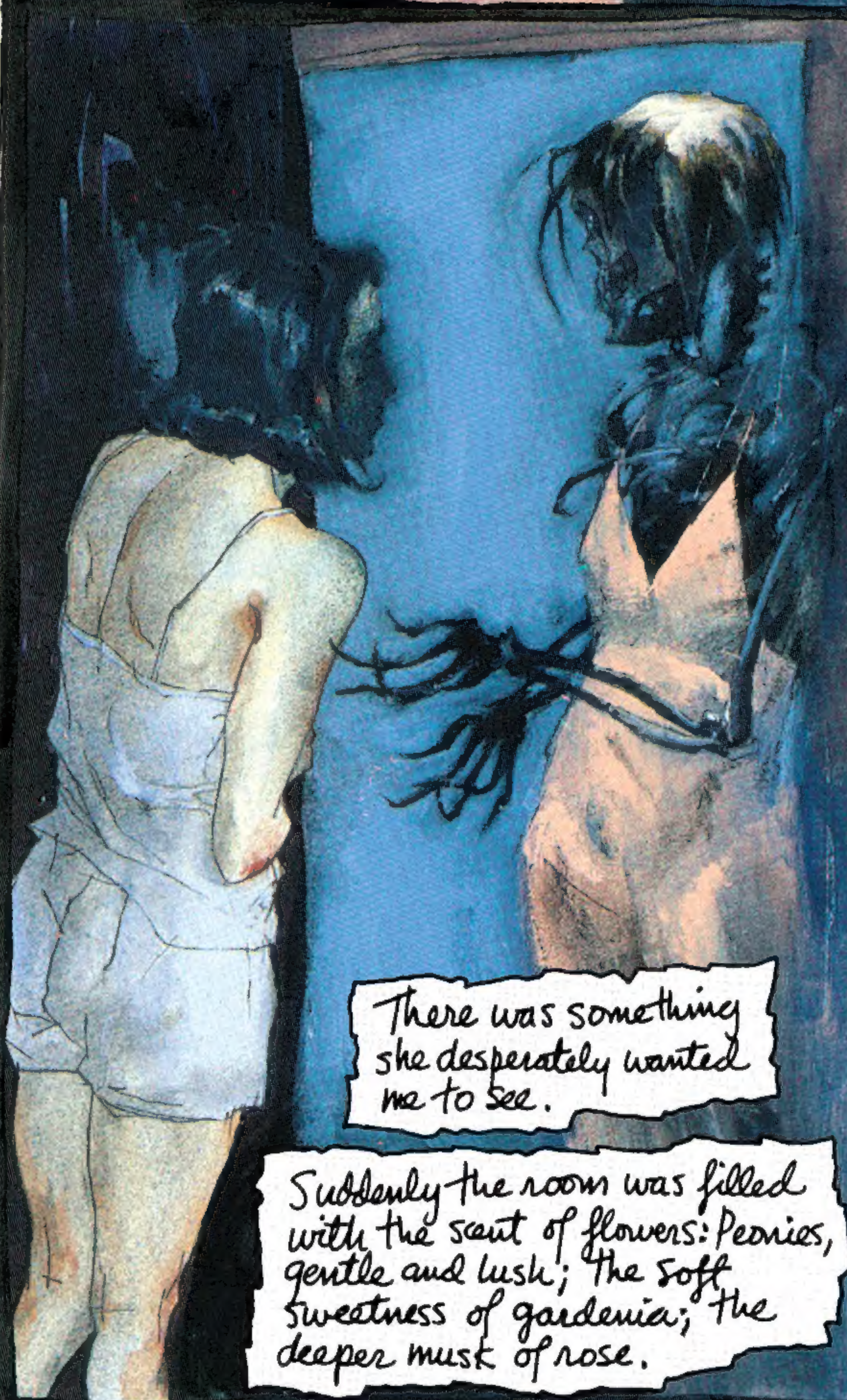
Again.



It came into
my bedroom
wearing what
was left of my
sister's body.

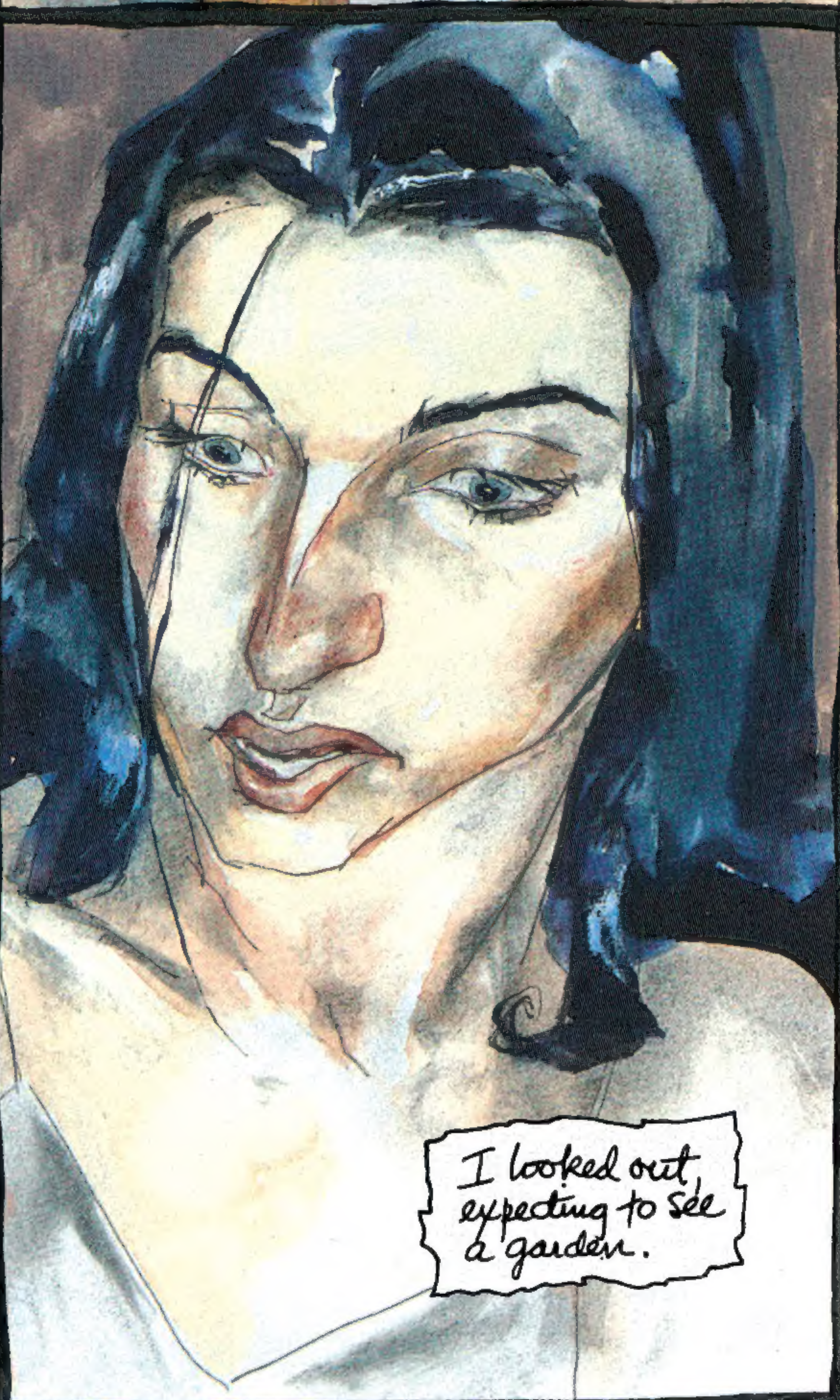


Even though she
couldn't speak, I
knew she was
impatient with me.



There was something
she desperately wanted
me to see.

Suddenly the room was filled
with the scent of flowers: Peonies,
gentle and lush; the soft
sweetness of gardenia; the
deeper musk of rose.



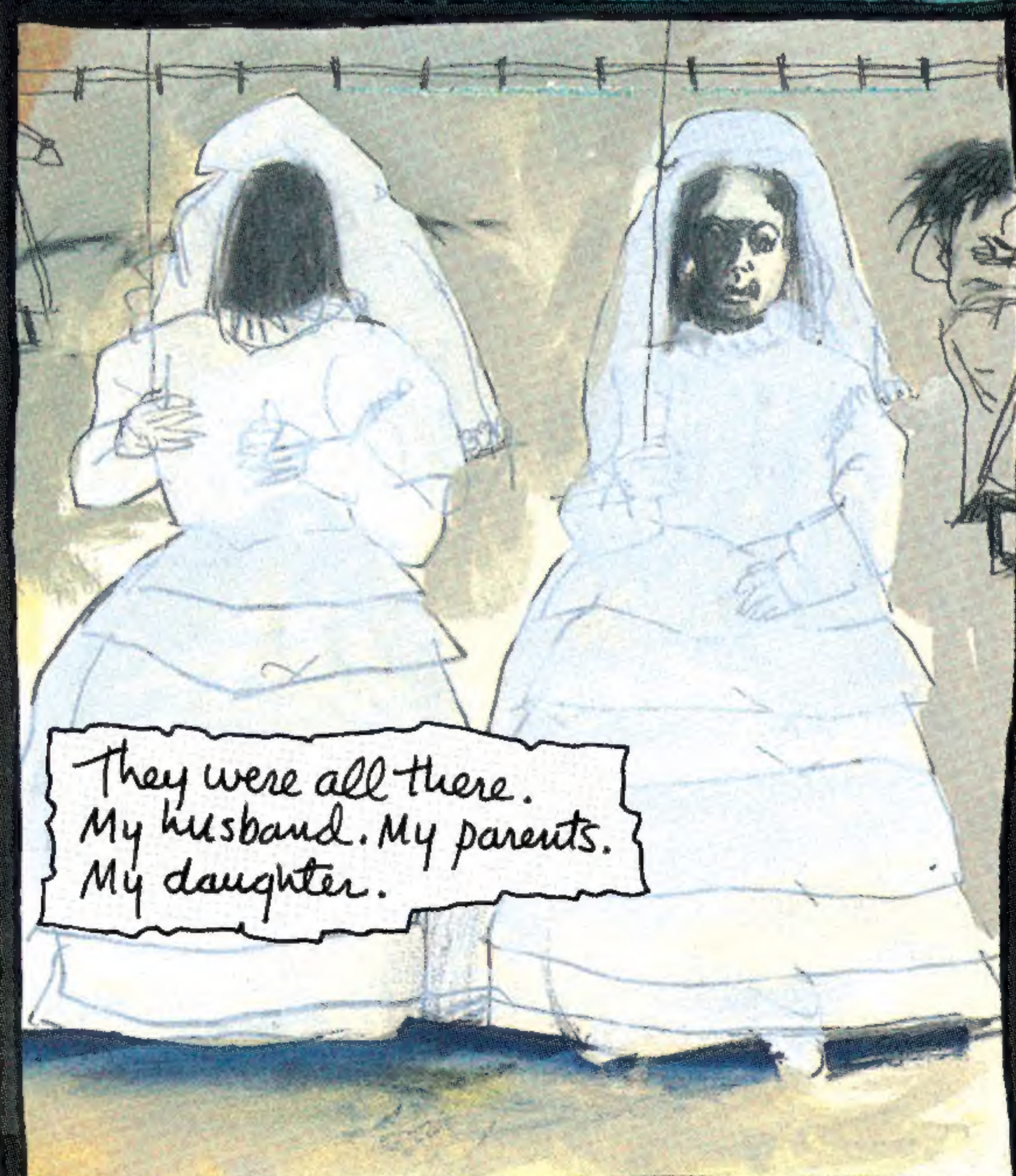
I looked out,
expecting to see
a garden.

And saw instead the
revels of the dead.



Friends whose names I had
forgotten. All the people who
once made up my life, dancing
to some music only they
could hear. But just as I
thought I might join them—

They were all there.
My husband. My parents.
My daughter.





I woke up, knowing somehow that I was no longer alone.



If I hadn't just had that dream, I probably would have grabbed my gun and told him to get off my land.



For all I knew, he had come to murder me in my bed.



But he was so polite - almost courtly, with the faintest touch of something foreign in his speech - so I let him stay.

He called himself John Rydes; I have no idea what his real name was.

Bubonic plague usually takes between two and five days to develop, so I made Rydes sleep in the barn for a week.

I don't think he minded: He even offered to take care of Paladin.



I let him, because horses don't seem to catch the plague. Which, ironically, is why Paladin's just about the only one left.

The rest all got slaughtered for untainted meat.

After his period of quarantine was over, we sat and talked. Ryder said that Manhattan was a graveyard, and he'd heard that Boston was much the same.

He asked me if there were any people left alive in this town. I said I knew of a few.

He said he wanted to meet them.

I told him I could try, but I didn't know if anyone would come. People are still frightened of strangers and crowds.

And frightened people can be dangerous: I still have a scar from where some feral child bit me when I tried to bring her food.

The last time the church bell rang, it was tolling out the numbers of the dead.

I wondered if it had lost the power to summon the living.

DONG
DONG
DONG
DONG

But they came. Out of curiosity, probably. Or from the fear of not knowing, which is the same thing, really.

Julian and Clarissa Boyle, who left their own children in Manhattan to die with the nanny.

Martin O'Donnel, formerly owner of O'Donnel Sporting Goods, who elected himself mayor of a ghost town last year.

Norman Leberman, who used all his small-town newspaperman's eloquence to bury my daughter with some ceremony.

And Janet Clark, who interrupted my only child's funeral to denounce Norman as a filthy Jew who'd caused the plague.

They were my neighbors, and the reason I hadn't visited town in over six months.

OKAY, STRANGER, YOU SO MUCH AS **BREATHE** IN MY DIRECTION AND I'LL SHOOT.

RUTH, WHAT'S THE SITUATION HERE? HAVE YOU BEEN EXPOSED?

CALM DOWN, MARTIN. THIS IS RYDER, AND HE'S GOT A CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH, SO DON'T GO BLOWING HOLES IN HIM.

THEN WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT YOU RANG THE BELL? YOU GOT MEDICINE IN THAT PACK? ANTI-BIOTICS?

NO. I CAN OFFER YOU NO CURES.

BUT I HAVE GOODS FOR PURCHASE, AND ONE THING MORE.

KNOWLEDGE. AND THE POWER THAT ATTENDS IT.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

I MEAN YOU NEED LIVE IN FEAR NO LONGER.

FOR I HAVE THE MEANS TO **CHEAT** DESTINY.

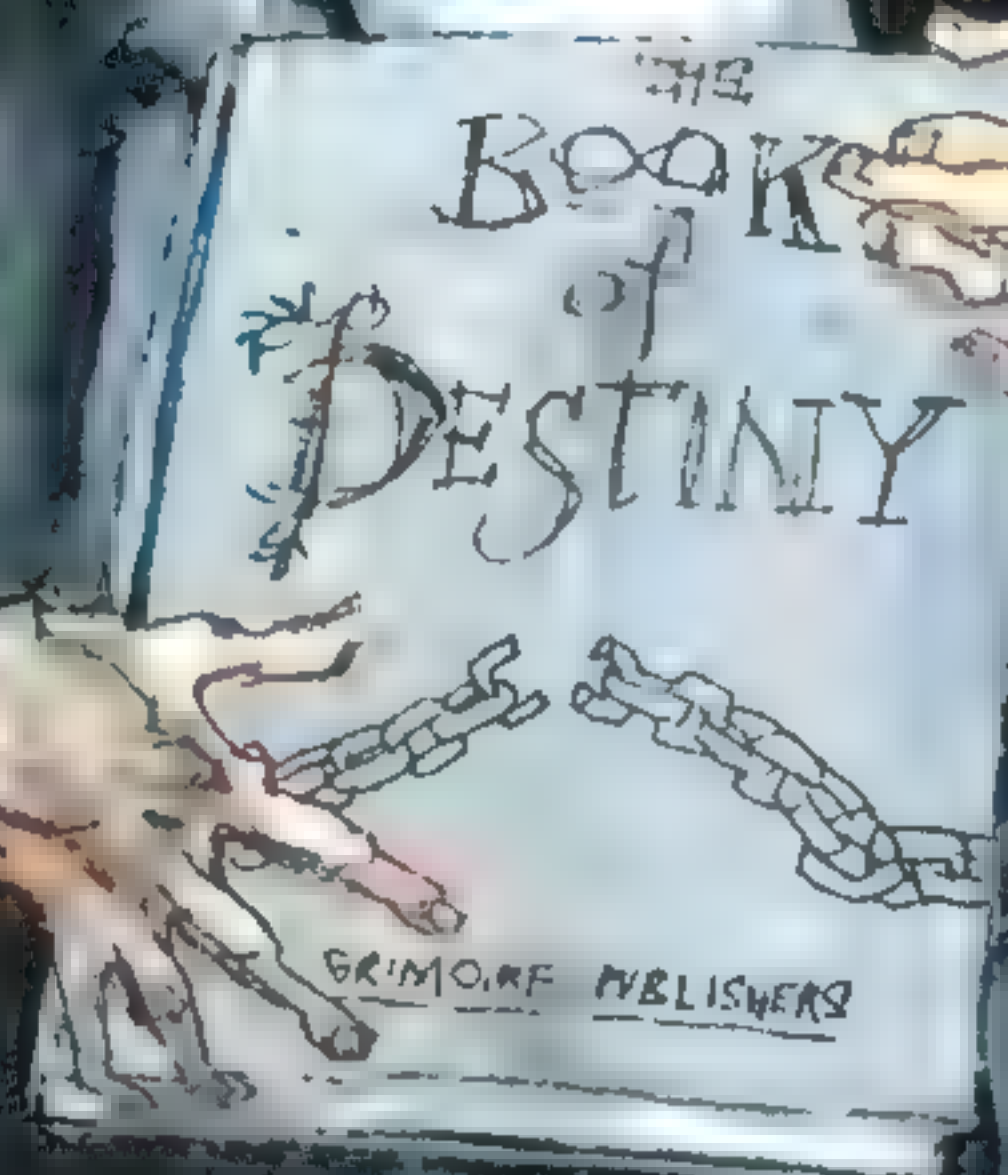
IF YOU KNEW CHRIST, YOU WOULD KNOW DESTINY CANNOT BE CHEATED. THE **GUILTY** WILL BE PUNISHED, THE INNOCENT REDEEMED.

SO HOW COME SO MANY OF YOUR GOOD CHRISTIANS ARE ROTTING ALL AROUND US?

THIS LIFE IS NOT IMPORTANT, LEBERMAN. THERE'S GOING TO BE A DAY OF JUDGMENT.

THIS BOOK CONTAINS THE DATE AND HOUR OF ITS ARRIVAL.

YES, THERE IS.



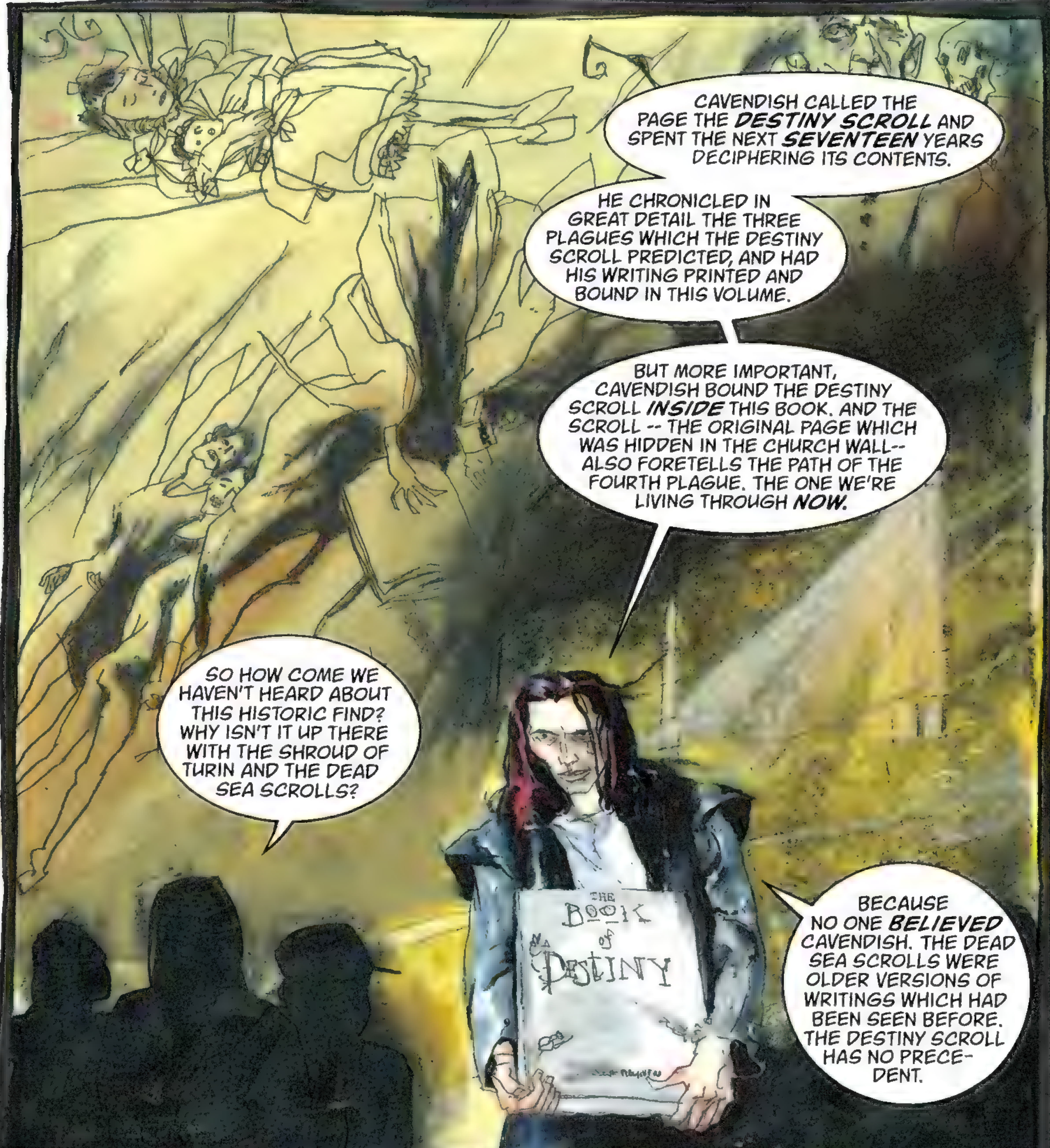
SO SOME NUT HAD A FIVE-HUNDRED-PAGE REVELATION PREDICTING THE PLAGUE, RIGHT?

WRONG.

JUST OVER ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, A RECTOR NAMED LORCAN CAVENDISH FOUND A PAGE OF PARCHMENT SECRETED WITHIN THE OLDEST PART OF A SMALL CHURCH IN NORTHERN ENGLAND.

CAVENDISH SOON REALIZED THE PAGE PREDATED THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY CHANCEL IN WHICH HE DISCOVERED IT.

YET THE PAGE DESCRIBED THE **PLAGUE OF JUSTINIAN**, THE **BLACK DEATH** AND THE **GREAT PLAGUE** IN PERFECT DETAIL, EVEN THOUGH THE **EARLIEST** OF THESE EVENTS HAPPENED LONG AFTER IT WAS WRITTEN.



CAVENDISH CALLED THE PAGE THE **DESTINY SCROLL** AND SPENT THE NEXT **SEVENTEEN YEARS** DECIPHERING ITS CONTENTS.

HE CHRONICLED IN GREAT DETAIL THE THREE PLAGUES WHICH THE DESTINY SCROLL PREDICTED, AND HAD HIS WRITING PRINTED AND BOUND IN THIS VOLUME.

BUT MORE IMPORTANT, CAVENDISH BOUND THE DESTINY SCROLL **INSIDE** THIS BOOK. AND THE SCROLL -- THE ORIGINAL PAGE WHICH WAS HIDDEN IN THE CHURCH WALL -- ALSO FORETELLS THE PATH OF THE FOURTH PLAGUE. THE ONE WE'RE LIVING THROUGH **NOW**.

SO HOW COME WE HAVEN'T HEARD ABOUT THIS HISTORIC FIND? WHY ISN'T IT UP THERE WITH THE SHROUD OF TURIN AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS?

BECAUSE NO ONE **BELIEVED** CAVENDISH. THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS WERE OLDER VERSIONS OF WRITINGS WHICH HAD BEEN SEEN BEFORE. THE DESTINY SCROLL HAS NO PRECEDENT.



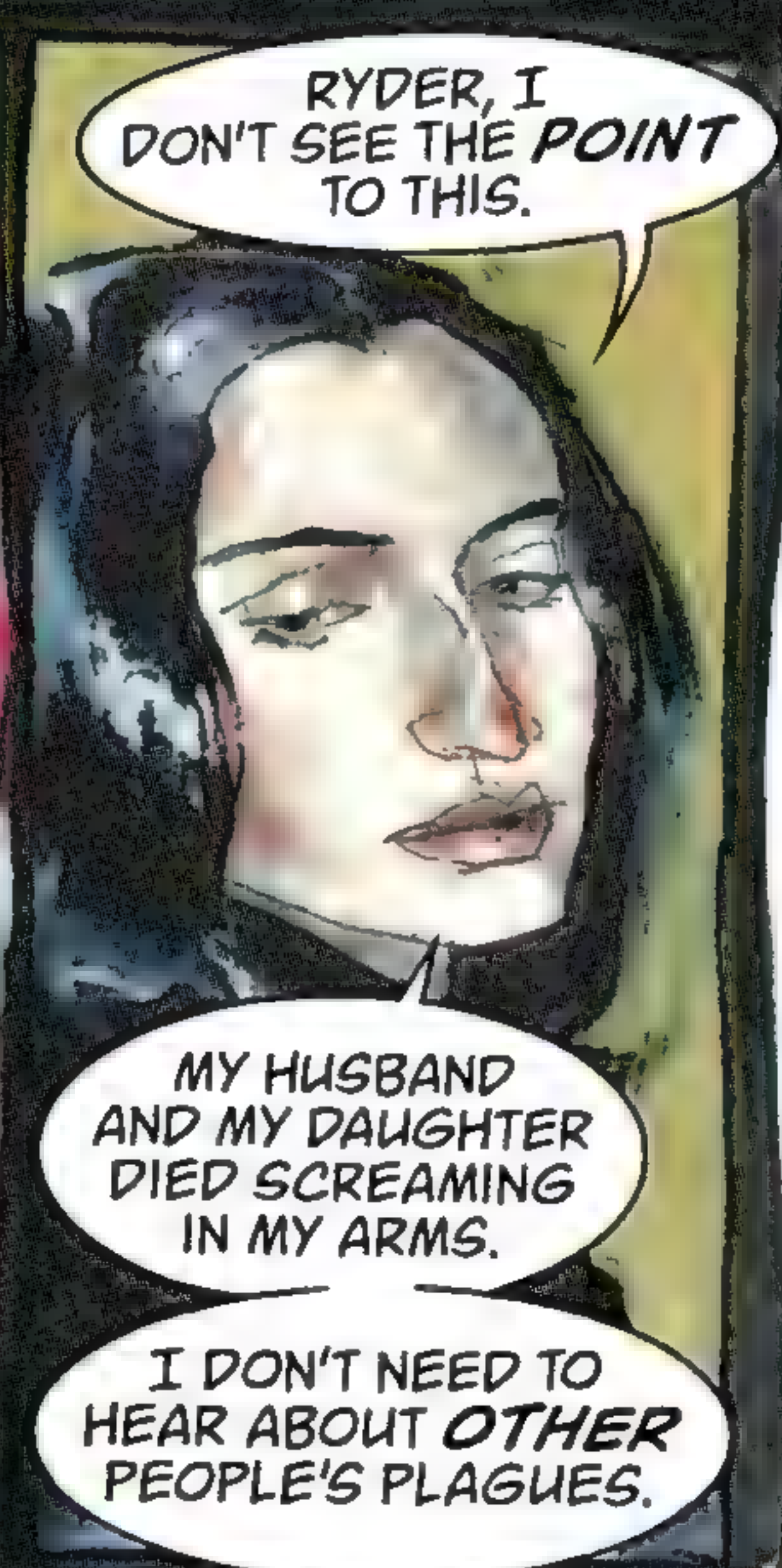
SO DO YOU HAVE ANY **PROOF** THAT WHAT YOU'RE PEDDLING IS AUTHENTIC?



WHY NOT **SHOW** US YOUR PAGE AND LET **US** DECIDE?



I WILL NOT SHOW YOU THE PAGE ITSELF. BUT I WILL READ TO YOU FROM THE BOOK, SO YOU MAY DECIDE ITS WORTH.



RYDER, I DON'T SEE THE **POINT** TO THIS.

MY HUSBAND AND MY DAUGHTER DIED SCREAMING IN MY ARMS.

I DON'T NEED TO HEAR ABOUT **OTHER** PEOPLE'S PLAGUES.

WAIT!

YOU **CAN'T** LEAVE, RUTH. IT'S YOU I WANT TO--

I MEAN, YOU'RE THE ONE WHO HAS TO--

I **DON'T** BELIEVE WE CAN KNOW THE FUTURE, AND NOTHING YOU SAY IS GOING TO **CHANGE** THAT.

The last time I kissed my husband's mouth, his breath was sweet with putrefaction.

I thought I would die with him. I meant to die...

But I did not.

JUST **LISTEN**, RUTH. THAT'S ALL. I DON'T ASK FOR YOUR BELIEF--NOT YET.

LOOK, I'M NOT PARTICULARLY GOOD WITH WORDS. NOT MUCH OF A SALESMAN, REALLY.

BUT ISN'T IT BETTER TO DO **ANYTHING** RATHER THAN JUST SIT IN YOUR HOUSE AND WAIT TO **DIE**?

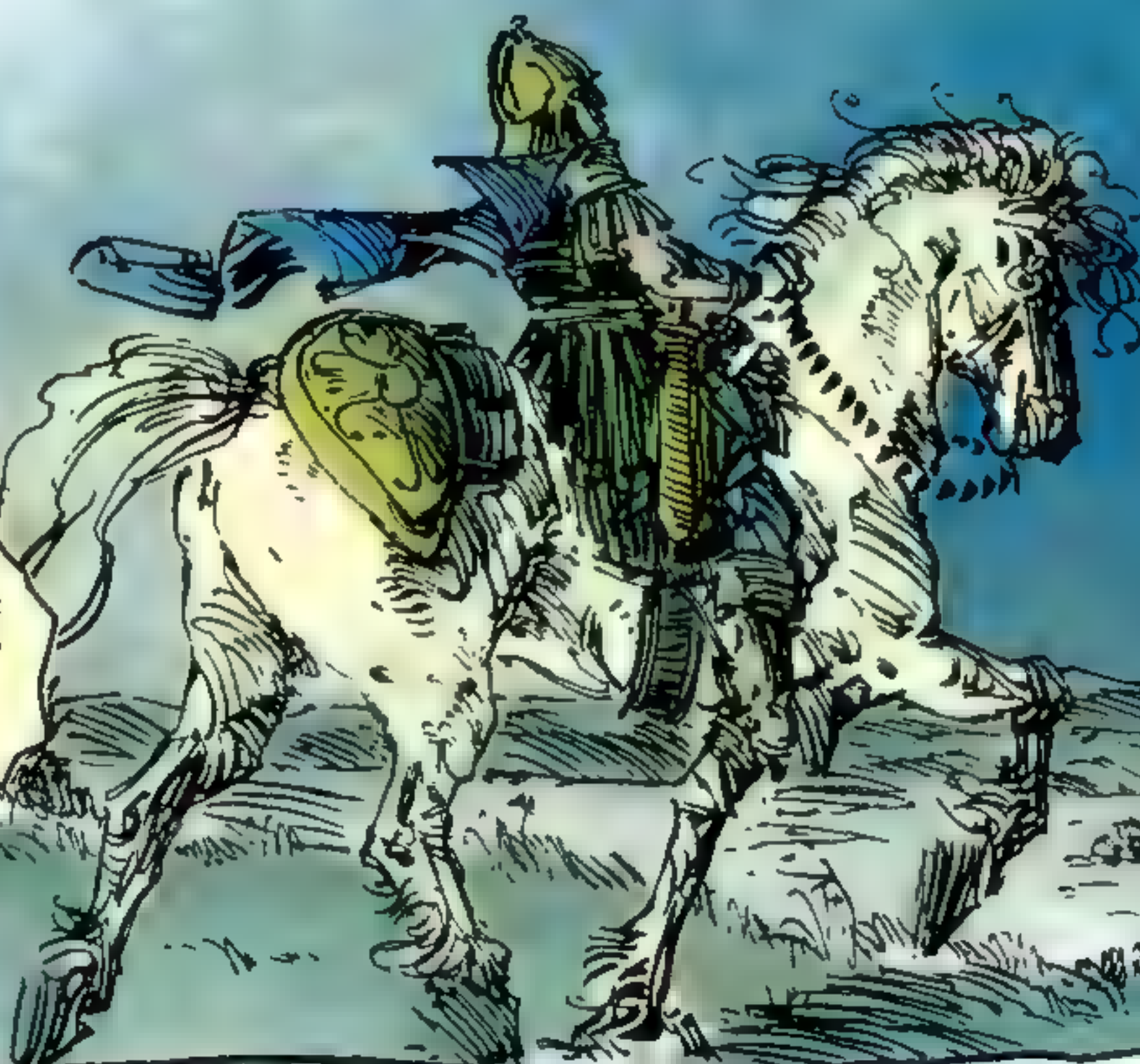
Only a very good salesman can tell you he's not a good salesman.

And whatever else he was, John Ryder was a very good salesman.



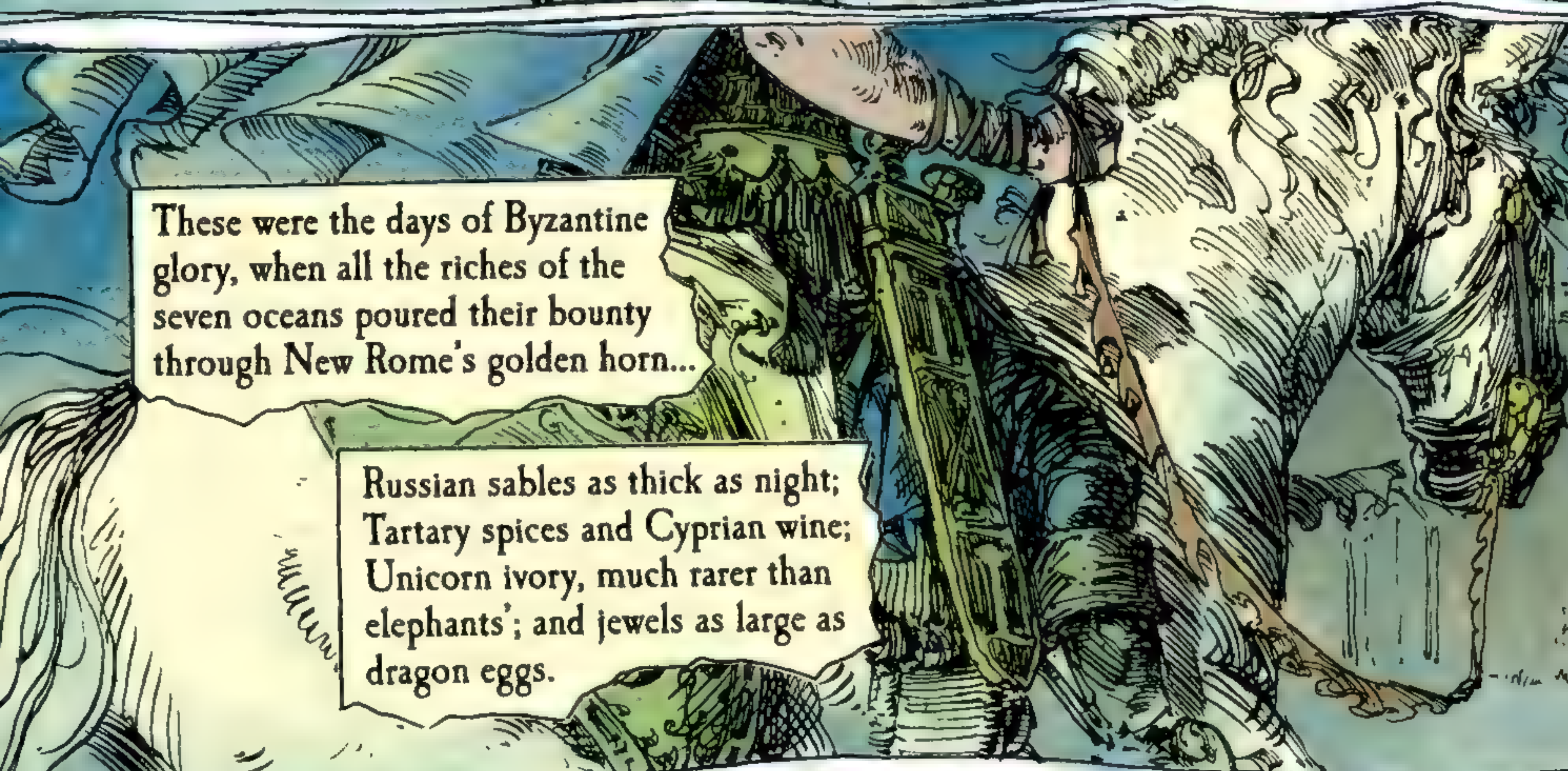
FROM THE BOOK OF DESTINY, GRIMOIRE
PUBLISHERS, GREAT BRITAIN, 1899:

"East of the sun and West of the moon, betwixt dog and wolf, he shall ride: Wombwards towards the labyrinth birth of his new Vocation." – The Destiny Scroll. This excerpt from the original manuscript is not as obscure as it may first appear. The initial phrase points us toward the city which lies between two continents, Byzantium, while the second refers to the vesper hour, between 3 and 6 a.m.



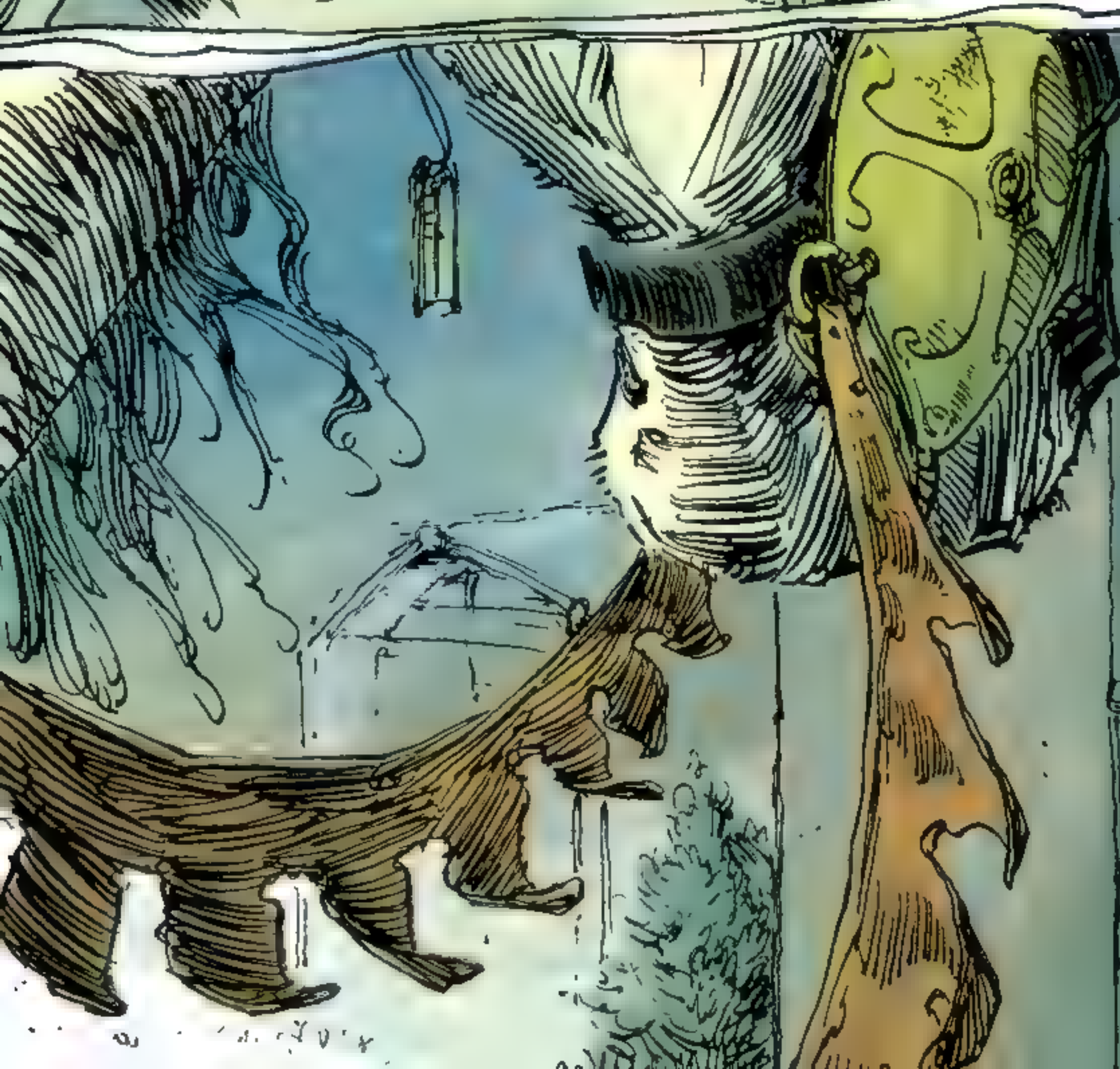
That much is certain. What follows is less reliable, gathered as it is from a scattered assortment of sources: cryptic footnotes to other histories, scavenged fragments of legend, and all the gray demesne between.

Yet in the ancient city of Constantinople, the real and the imagined were hard to separate, for it was there that the Kingdom of Man touched the outermost borders of the unseen realms, and common folk believed that demons and angels walked the earth in mortal guise.

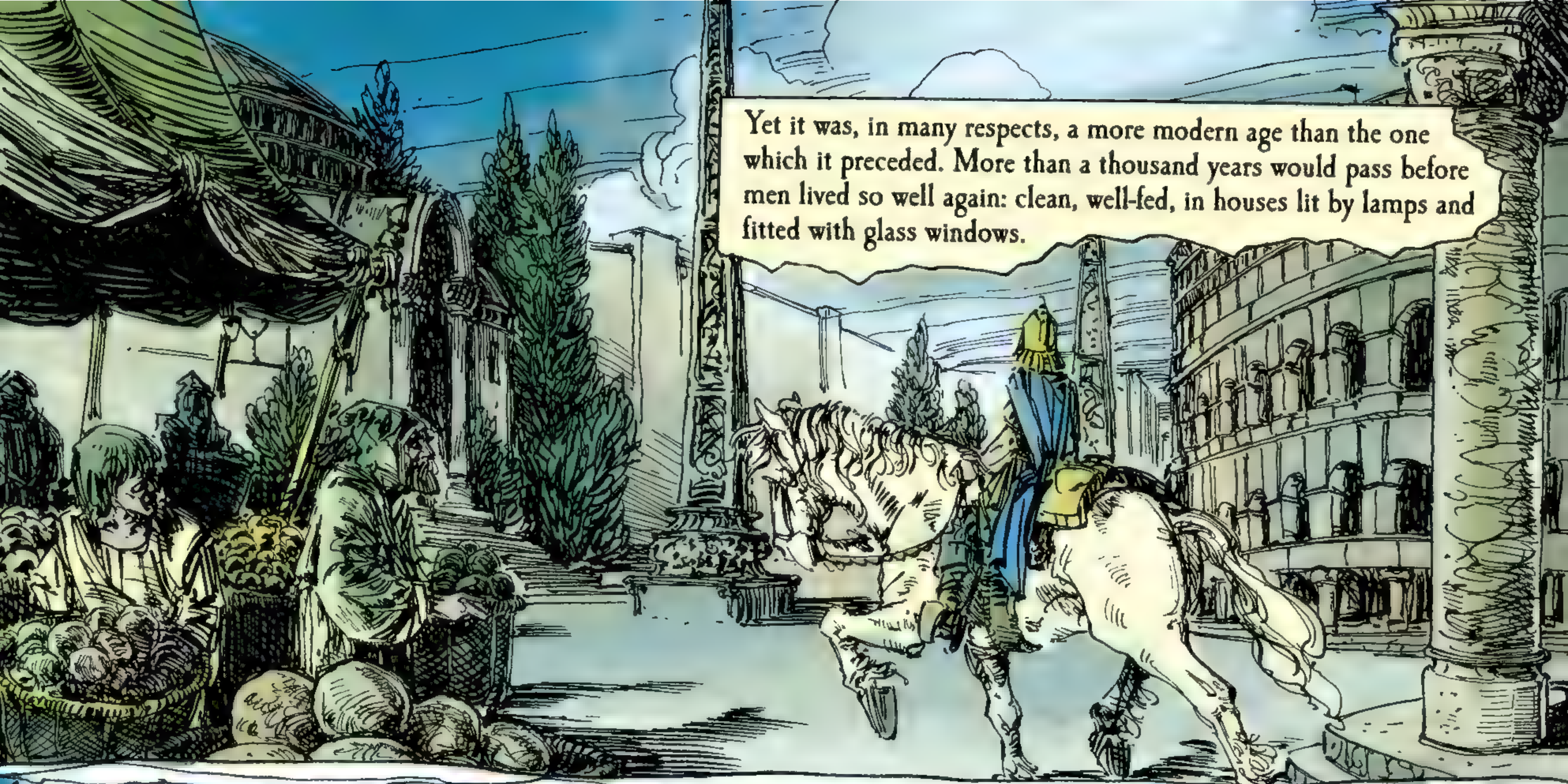


These were the days of Byzantine glory, when all the riches of the seven oceans poured their bounty through New Rome's golden horn...

Russian sables as thick as night;
Tartary spices and Cyprian wine;
Unicorn ivory, much rarer than elephants'; and jewels as large as dragon eggs.



It was a time of luxury and faith, when Christian virtues were pursued with pagan fervor, and few could draw the distinction between the two.



Yet it was, in many respects, a more modern age than the one which it preceded. More than a thousand years would pass before men lived so well again: clean, well-fed, in houses lit by lamps and fitted with glass windows.



And if one wished to travel all that way down the dark corridors of time, and desired to emerge in Byzantium's greatest moment, one would find oneself midway through the reign of Flavius Petrus Sabbatius Justinianus, known as Justinian the Great.



And then came the plague.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Our story begins on a familiar note, with a dancing girl named Theodora, whose wit and beauty had captured the heart and hand of the emperor himself.

Yet this is no fairy tale, and the court paladins neither forgot nor forgave that their new empress was *not* to the purple born.

These nobles were aware that the Empress Theodora had taken lovers *before* Justinian, and they whispered rumours of far worse behaviour: orgies, bestiality, and other purported perversities.

And yet it proved unwise to underestimate the lady. When rebellion threatened the emperor's life, it was Theodora who bade her husband stay and fight, saying "An empire makes a fine shroud."

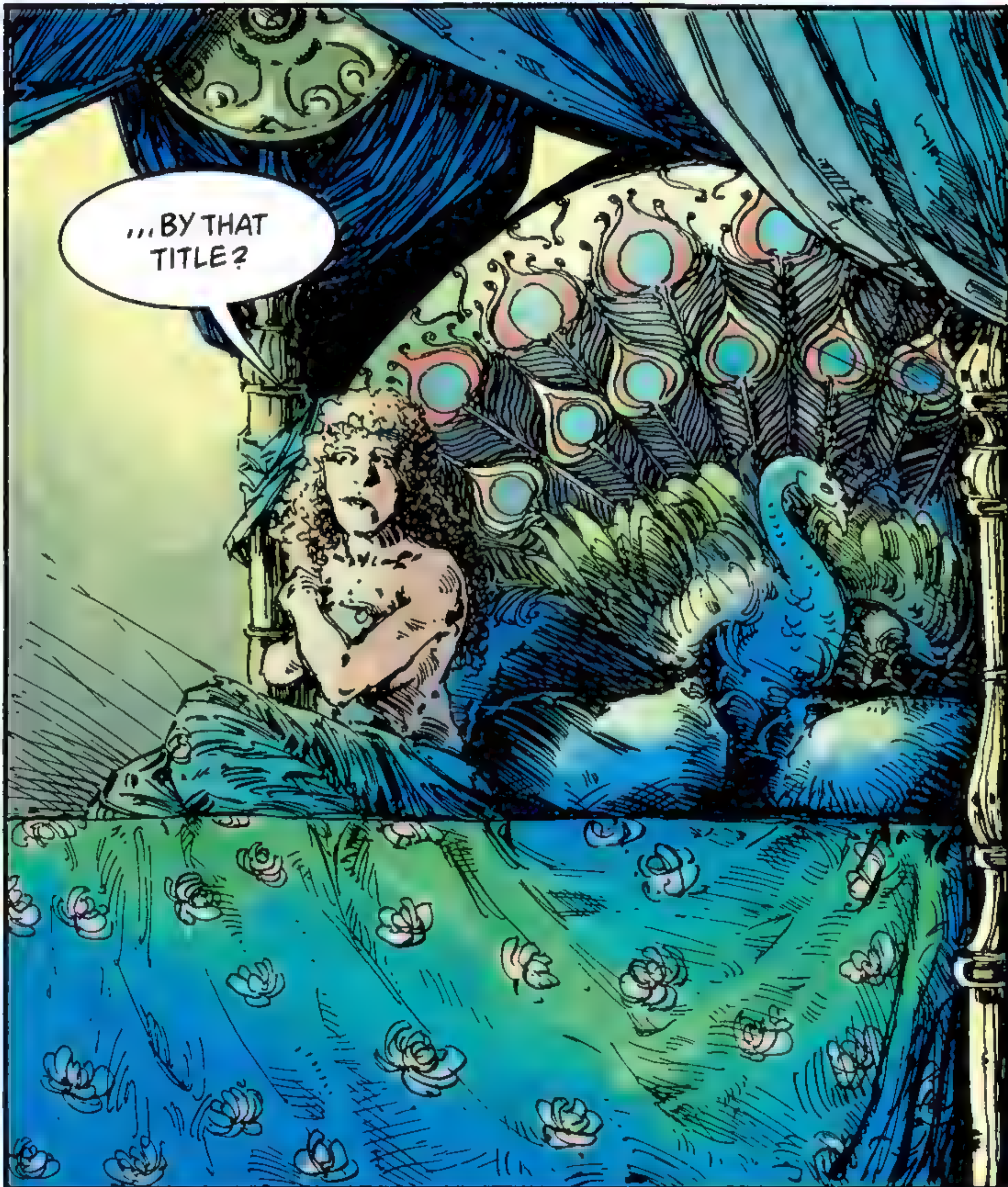
Justinian always remembered that his wife had saved his throne. After that, Theodora ruled by his side.

AUGUSTA...

Destiny, it seemed, had singled her out.

YOU! I REMEMBER YOU.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE NOW? AND WHY DID YOU JUST CALL ME...



...BY THAT
TITLE?



JUSTINIAN?



I *KNEW* I WOULD FIND YOU
HERE. WHAT ESOTERIC BIT OF LAW
ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW? CAN
A SLAVE OWN A SLAVE? CAN A
HORSE OWN A GOAT?

I FIND IT HARD
TO SLEEP THESE DAYS.
MY VERY *FLESH* SEEMS
TO ACHIE. BUT WHY
ARE *YOU* AWAKE,
THEO?



I HAD
THE STRANGEST
DREAM.

THERE WAS
THIS MAN-- AT FIRST
I THOUGHT HE WAS A
MONK. BUT UPON WAKING,
I REALIZED I KNEW
HIM. HE'D COME TO
ME BEFORE... WHEN
I WAS A CHILD.

IN THE
BROTHEL.

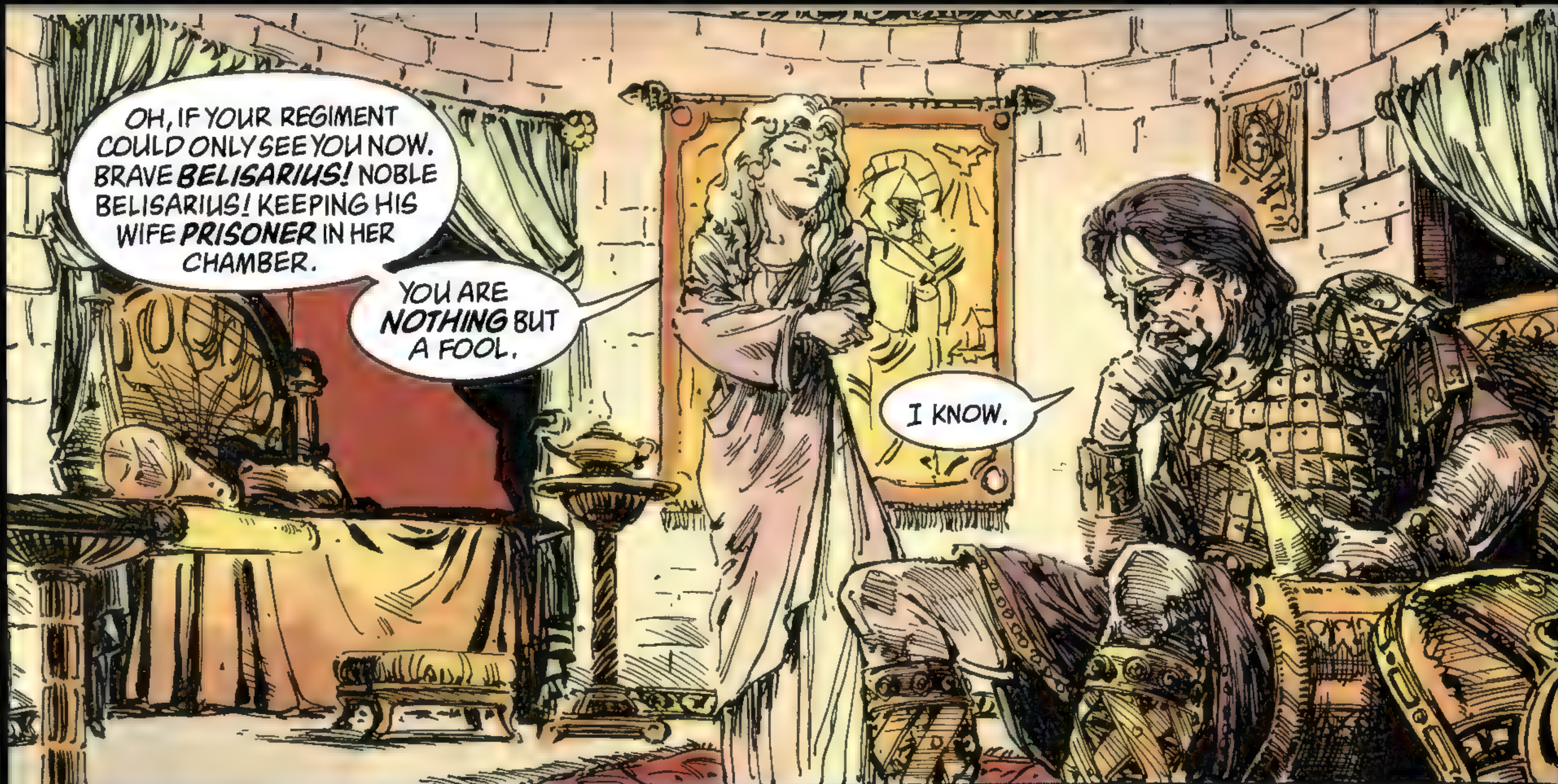


HE DIDN'T TAKE
ME. HE SAID HE JUST
WANTED TO TALK.

WHAT
DID HE SAY
TO YOU?

HE SAID I WOULD
REACH THE RANK OF
EMPRESS, AND THE TITLE
AUGUSTA. HE SAID... I
WOULD GIVE HIM
A *SON*.





OH, IF YOUR REGIMENT
COULD ONLY SEE YOU NOW.
BRAVE **BELISARIUS!** NOBLE
BELISARIUS! KEEPING HIS
WIFE **PRISONER** IN HER
CHAMBER.

YOU ARE
NOTHING BUT
A FOOL.

I KNOW.

ONLY A **FOOL** WOULDN'T
FIGURE OUT WHAT EVERYONE
ELSE ALREADY KNEW.

THAT YOU WERE
RUTTING IN OUR
BED, AGAINST ALL
THE **LAWS OF**
GOD AND
MAN...

IT'S A **LIE**, I TELL
YOU, A HORRIBLE **LIE!**
WHY DO YOU **LISTEN** TO
THIS VICIOUS **SLANDER?**
THEODOSIUS IS LIKE
A **SON** TO ME.

HE WAS LIKE A SON TO ME, TOO,
ONLY I THOUGHT HIM A BIT TOO
OLD TO BE NURSING AT A
MOTHER'S BREAST...

KILL ME IF
YOU **MUST**,
BUT IT'S A
LIE!

ARE YOU **REALLY** READY
TO **DIE**, ANTONINA?

BY GOD'S
WOUNDS, I
CANNOT DO
IT.

I LEAVE
YOU TO **REJOICE**
IN YOUR
VICTORY.



A FINE PERFORMANCE! YOU HAVE **COMPLETELY** UNMANNED HIM.

AUGUSTA THEODORA, I WAS NOT AWARE WE HAD AN AUDIENCE.



WERE YOU NOT? AND I WAS TOLD YOU HAD **POWERS** OUT OF THE ORDINARY.

I AM A GOOD CHRISTIAN, AUGUSTA, NOT A SORCERESS.



OF COURSE. IT WAS YOUR MOTHER WHO WAS A WITCH, WAS IT NOT?

THAT IS A NASTY RUMOR. YOU SHOULD HEAR WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT YOUR MOTHER.

I'M AFRAID NO ONE HAS BEEN **BRAVE** ENOUGH TO ENLIGHTEN ME. IT'S SO **NICE** TO SEE SOMEONE UNAFRAID OF **TORTURE**.



I WAS ONLY **TEASING** YOU, AUGUSTA.

HOW **LUCKY** FOR YOU THAT I HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR, ANTONINA. NOW, IS IT TRUE THAT YOU CAN **DIVINE** THE FUTURE?

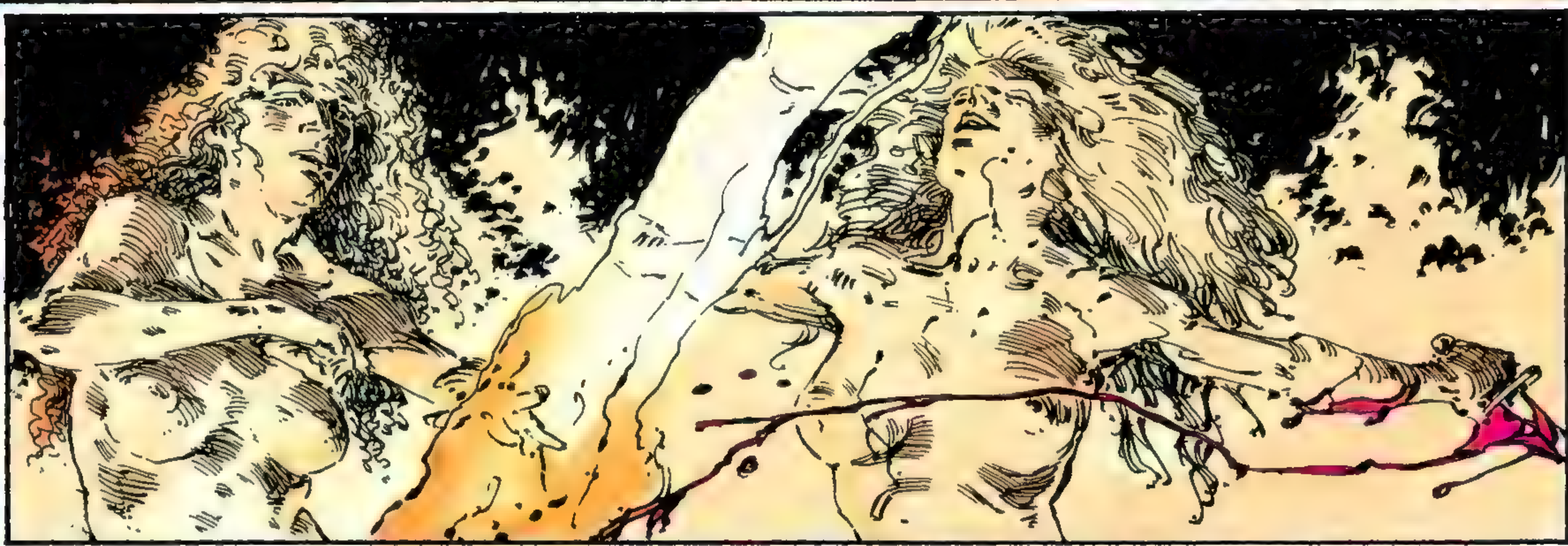


AND IF I **CAN**?



"SHOW ME WHETHER I SHALL YET
BEAR THE EMPEROR A SON, ANTONINA,
AND I WILL TELL YOUR HUSBAND THAT
I KNOW FOR A FACT YOU ARE AS
CONSTANT AS BREATHING AND AS
FAITHFUL AS SUNRISE.

"THEN THE GOOD
GENERAL MAY GO
OFF TO A WAR
AGAIN, FOR THE
GREATER GOOD
OF US ALL."



WHAT IS IT?
WHAT DO YOU
SEE?

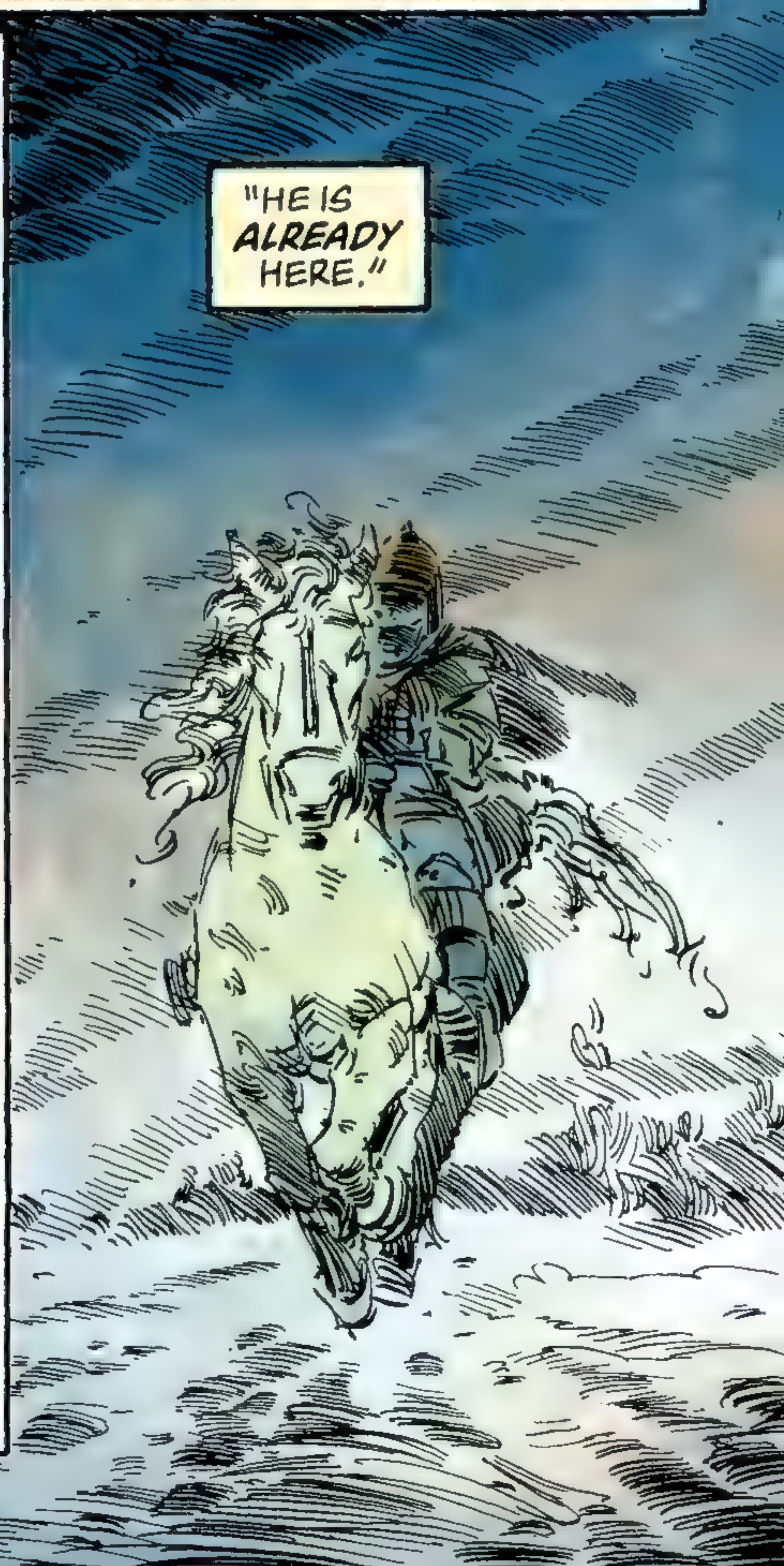
AAAH...

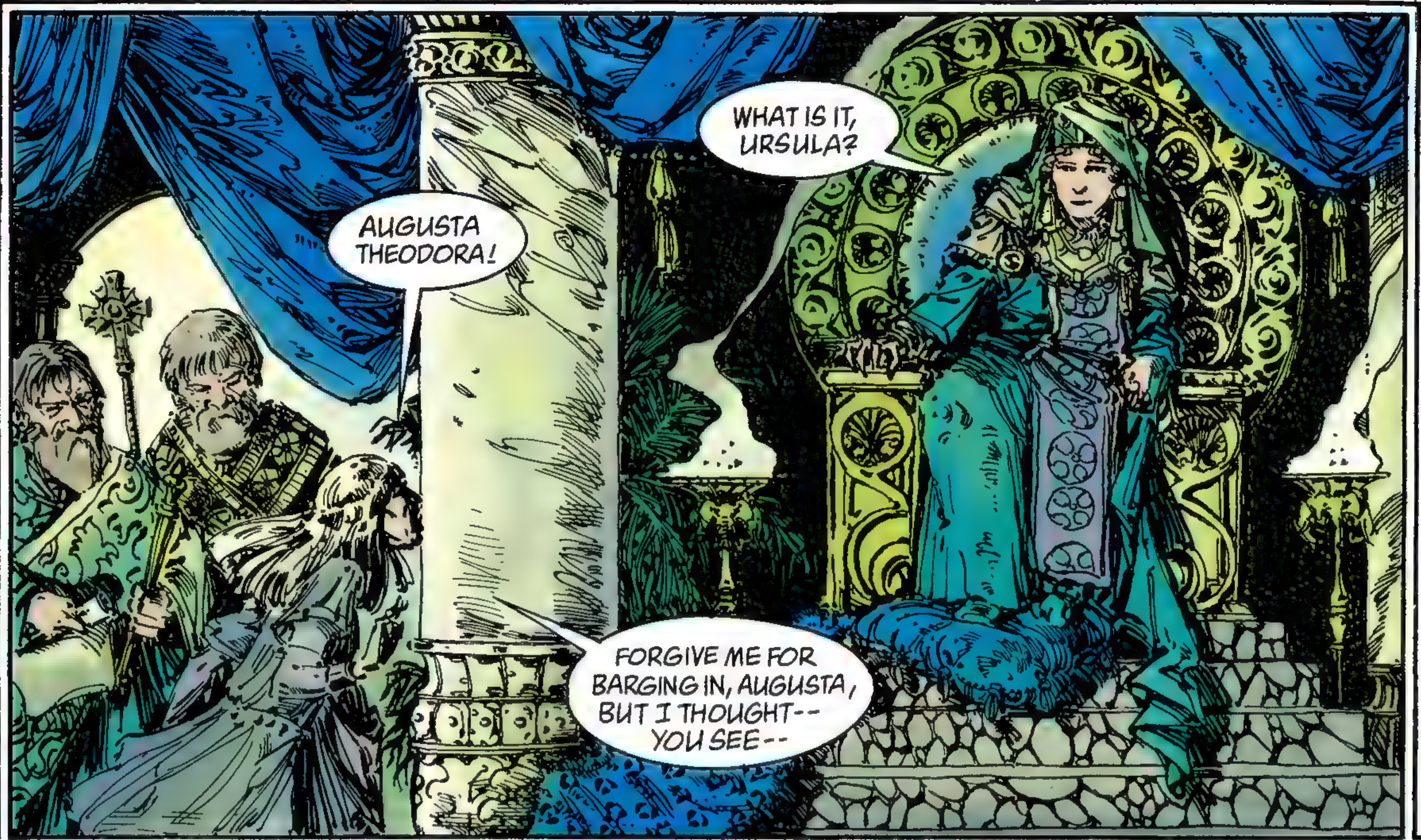
I SEE...
I SEE YOUR SON,
THEODORA.

A SON!
WHEN WILL HE
ARRIVE?

MY LADY...

"HE IS
ALREADY
HERE."





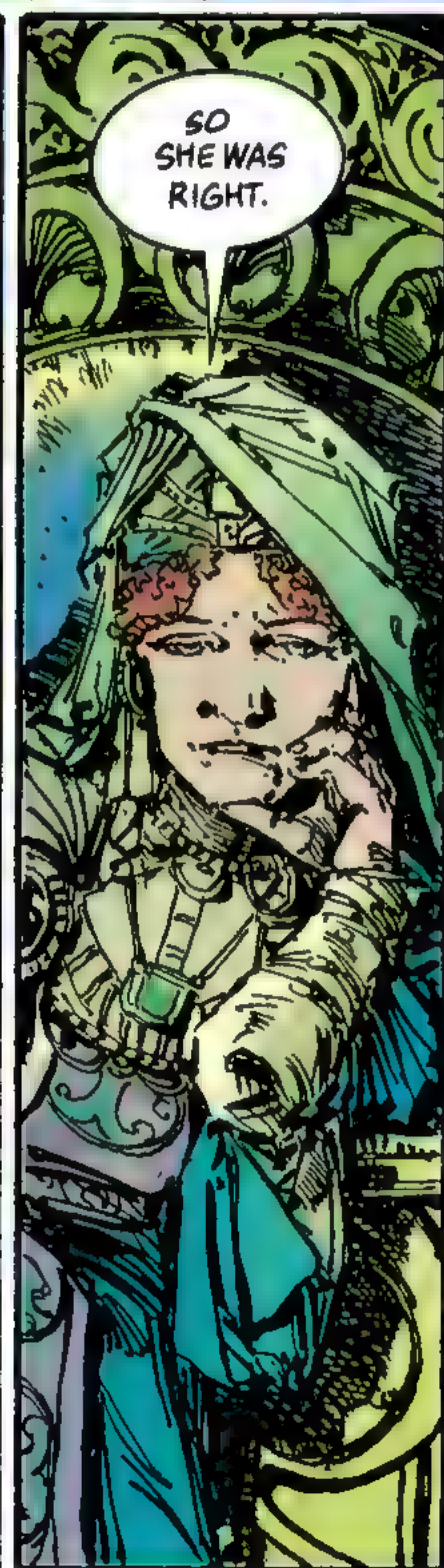
AUGUSTA
THEODORA!

WHAT IS IT,
URSULA?

FORGIVE ME FOR
BARGING IN, AUGUSTA,
BUT I THOUGHT--
YOU SEE--



--THERE'S A YOUNG MAN
AT THE PALACE GATE WHO
SAYS HE'S YOUR SON!



SO
SHE WAS
RIGHT.



TAKE
ME TO
HIM.

BUT
AUGUSTA--THE
PROTOCOL IS
THAT HE SHOULD
BE BROUGHT
TO YOU.



DO NOT CONTRADICT
ME, URSULA. THAT IS
CORRECT PROTOCOL.

SMACK



DEAR MERCIFUL
GOD, IT IS HIM.



DO YOU NOT
BOW BEFORE YOUR
EMPRESS?

NO. MY
FATHER TAUGHT
ME TO BOW BEFORE
NO MAN, NOR
ANY **WOMAN**
EITHER.



BUT I HAVE BROUGHT
YOU A GIFT, A HORSE
FROM THE FARTHEST
REACHES OF THE
EMPIRE.

HE IS ALL I POSSESS
IN THE WORLD, BUT I OFFER
HIM TO YOU.



IS THE
ANIMAL A
GIFT OR
A
CURSE?

HE BORE ME ALL THE WAY FROM
ARABIA WITHOUT COMPLAINT,
AND ONCE SAVED MY
LIFE WHEN I WOULD
HAVE DROWNED.

TREAT
HIM WELL,
MOTHER.

EASY,
BOY, I'M
JUST--
EASY!



I AM **NOT**
YOUR MOTHER.
WHAT IS YOUR
NAME?

I AM JOHN, LIKE MY FATHER.
MY HAIR IS THE SAME SHADE AS HIS,
BUT HE ALWAYS SAID I HAD
YOUR EYES.

AND WHERE IS
HE NOW, YOUR
FATHER?



DEAD. A SWORD PIERCED
HIM THROUGH HIS THROAT. HE
IS BURIED BENEATH THE SANDS
OF ARABIA.

A SOLDIER'S
DEATH. WAS HE
A SOLDIER?

HE
WAS A
HERO.



AND THIS HERO
TOLD YOU YOUR
MOTHER WAS
EMPRESS OF
BYZANTIUM?



NO. HE TOLD
ME MY MOTHER
WAS A COMMON
SLUT WHO
DANCED ON
THE **STAGE**.

YOU WERE
NOT **EMPRESS**
WHEN YOUR BELLY
SWELLED WITH
ME, MOTHER.



COME, FOLLOW ME INTO THE PALACE WHERE WE CAN SPEAK IN PRIVATE.

I SEE YOU HAVE MY TEMPER AND NOT YOUR FATHER'S. HE WAS ALWAYS A **MILD** MAN, DESPITE HIS PROFESSION.

HE WAS **GOOD** TO YOU, THEN, WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD?



HE WAS BOTH FATHER AND MOTHER TO ME.

I SEE YOU BLAME ME FOR NOT RAISING YOU MYSELF. BUT I WAS LITTLE MORE THAN A CHILD MYSELF WHEN I HAD YOU.



I DO NOT BLAME YOU. MY **FATHER** DID. HE TOLD ME THAT YOU WERE THE MOST UNNATURAL WOMAN EVER TO DRAW BREATH.



HE SAID YOU WISHED ME **DEAD** IN YOUR **WOMB**. HE SAID I MUST NEVER SEEK YOU OUT. BUT WHEN HE DIED...



YOU POOR **FOOL**.

AND WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL HAPPEN NOW?



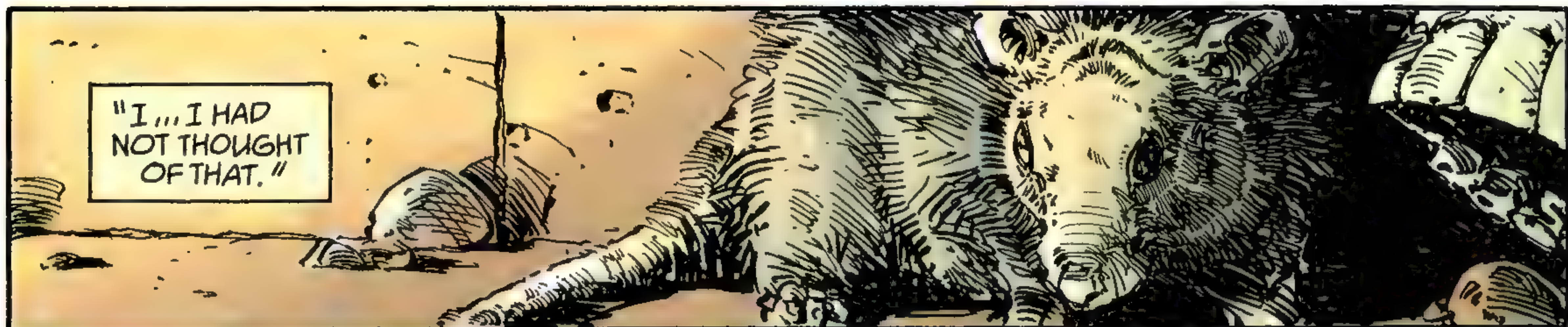
I THOUGHT... I COULD STAY IN THE PALACE FOR A WHILE. GET TO KNOW YOU.



BUT YOU ARE THE **BASTARD** SON OF THE EMPRESS. WHAT RANK DO YOU THINK YOU SHOULD HOLD? SHALL WE ROBE YOU IN ROYAL **PURPLE**, OR MERELY COUNT YOU AMONG THE **PALADINS** AT COURT?

AND HOW SHOULD THE **EMPEROR** RECEIVE YOU?

KLIK



"I... I HAD NOT THOUGHT OF THAT."

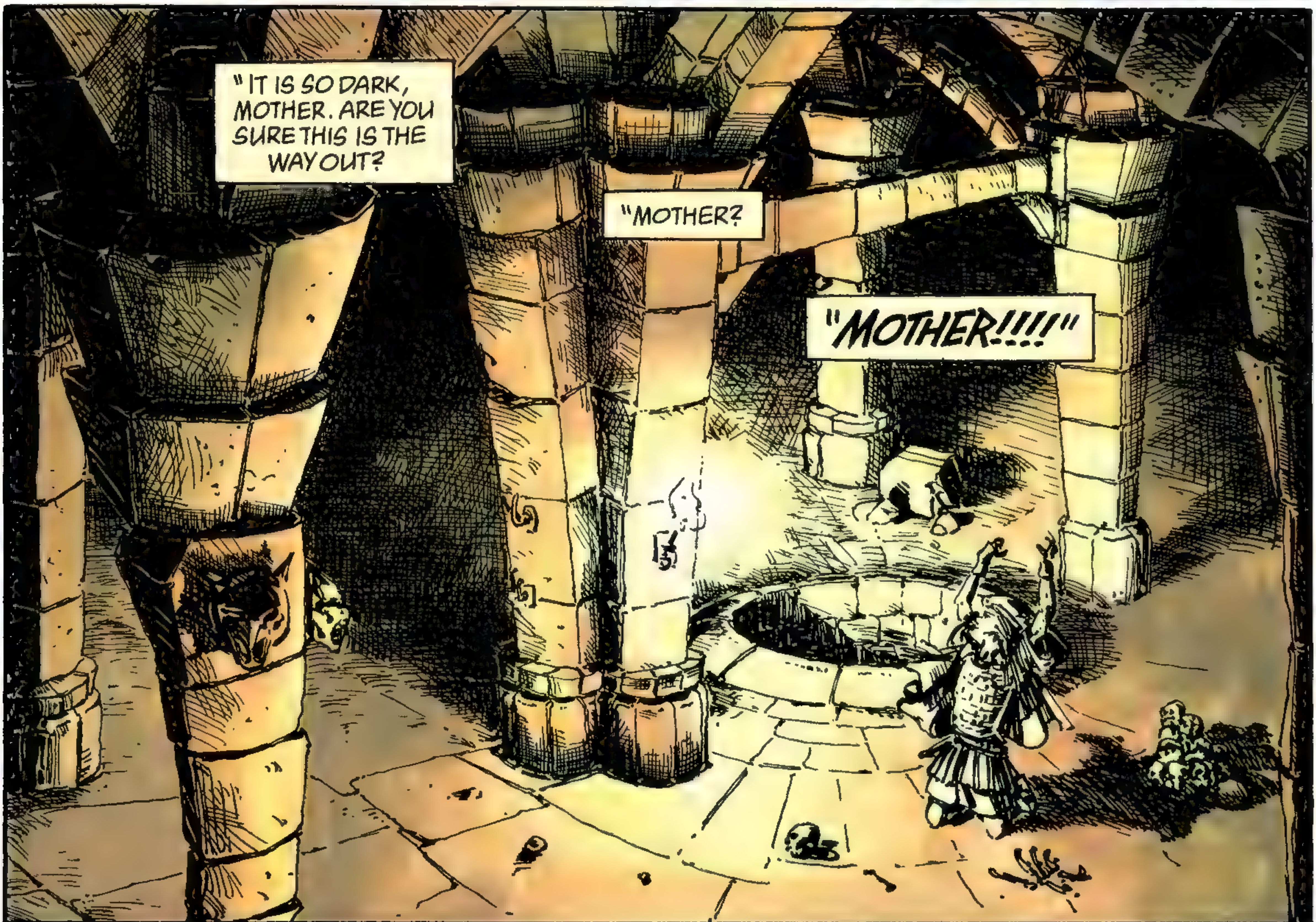


"AND WILL I GO TO CHURCH WITH YOU, BEFORE THE PATRIARCH AND ALL THE PEOPLE, AND SAY, THIS IS MY SON, FROM MY TIME AS A WHORE?"



"I COULD SAY I WAS YOUR NEPHEW, OR... PERHAPS I SHOULD JUST GO AWAY AGAIN."

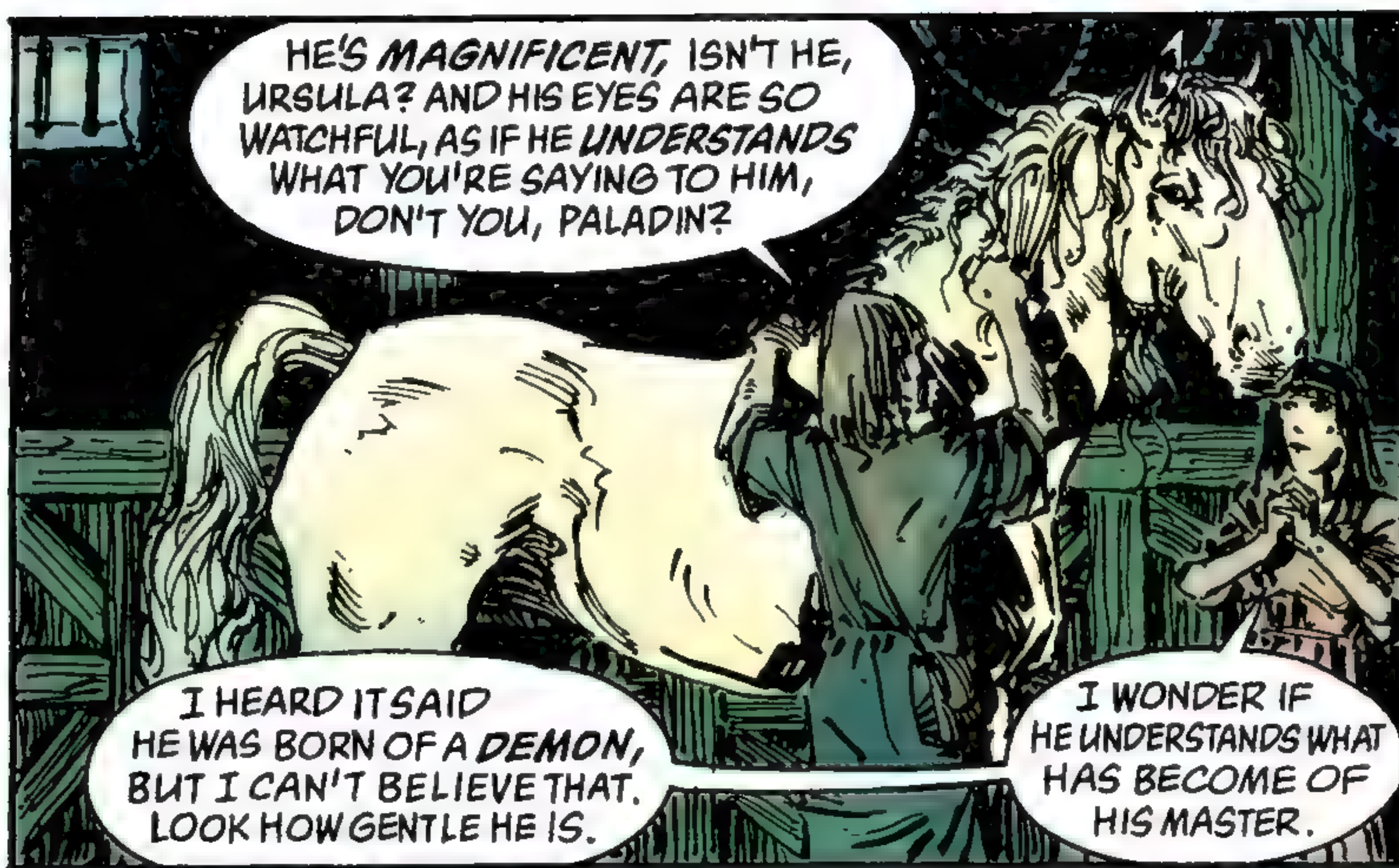
"I AM AFRAID THAT YOU MUST GO AWAY, MY SON, OR NONE OF US WILL BE SAFE. IN FACT, YOU MUST TAKE A SECRET ROUTE THROUGH A TUNNEL BENEATH THE PALACE, SO THAT NO ONE ELSE REMARKS ON YOUR PRESENCE."



"IT IS SO DARK, MOTHER. ARE YOU SURE THIS IS THE WAY OUT?"

"MOTHER?"

"MOTHER!!!!"



HE'S MAGNIFICENT, ISN'T HE, URSULA? AND HIS EYES ARE SO WATCHFUL, AS IF HE UNDERSTANDS WHAT YOU'RE SAYING TO HIM, DON'T YOU, PALADIN?

I HEARD IT SAID HE WAS BORN OF A DEMON, BUT I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT. LOOK HOW GENTLE HE IS.

I WONDER IF HE UNDERSTANDS WHAT HAS BECOME OF HIS MASTER.



WHAT DID THE EMPRESS SAY?

SHE DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING, BASIL. IT WAS AS IF THE YOUNG MAN HAD NEVER EXISTED...



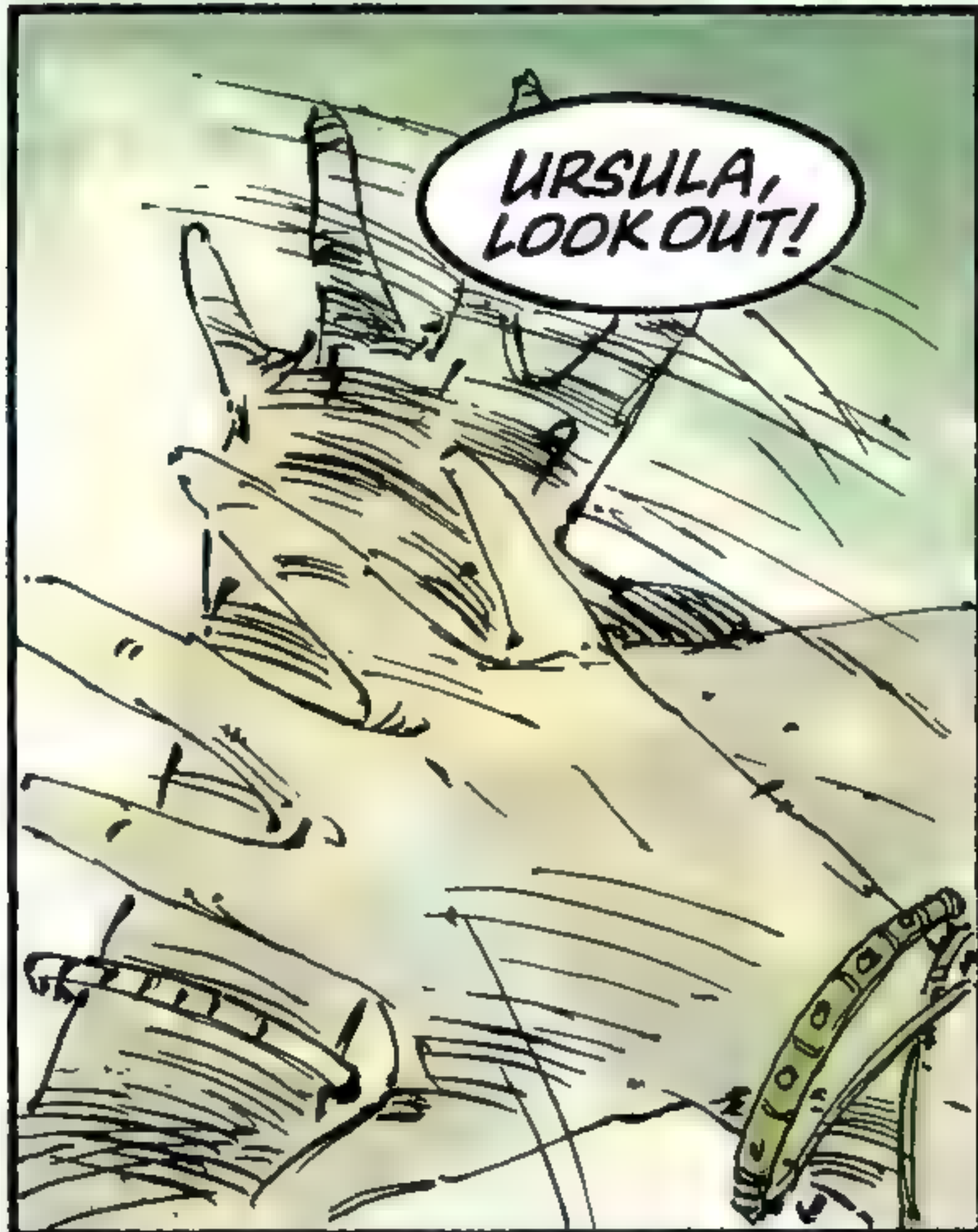
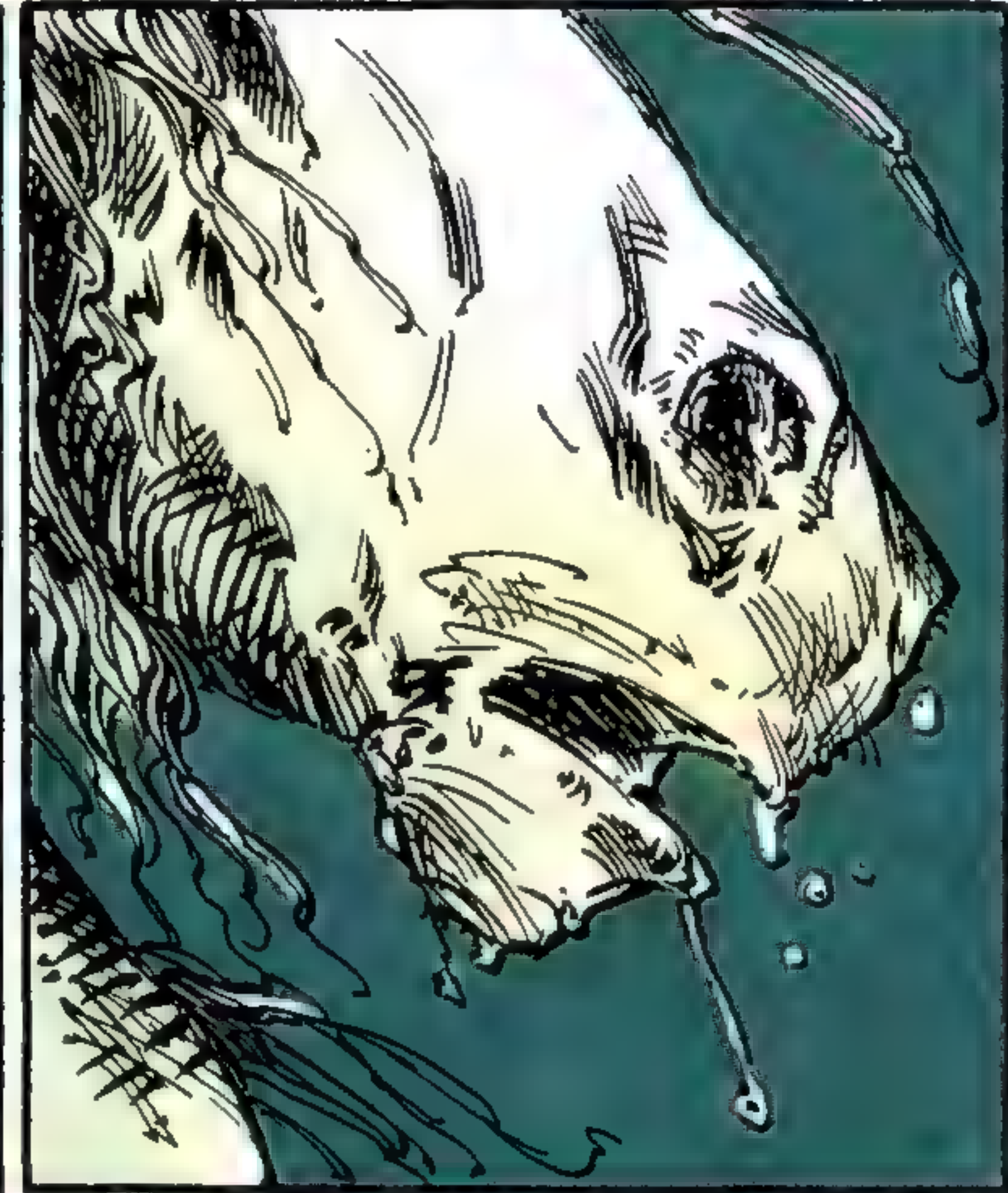
BUT SURELY SHE WOULD NOT...

HE HAS VANISHED! AND SOME OF THE NIGHT SERVANTS SAY THAT WHEN ALL IS QUIET...

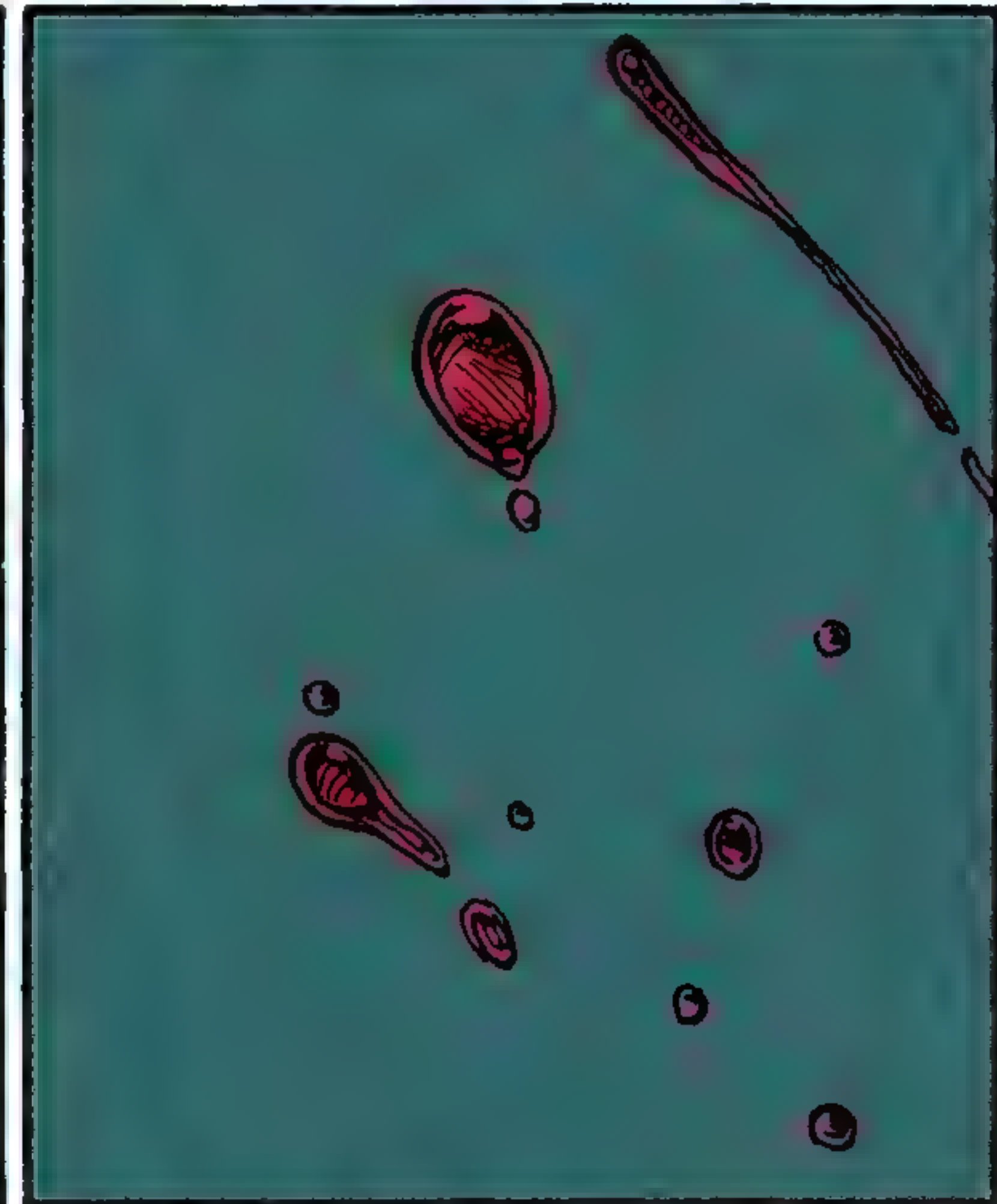
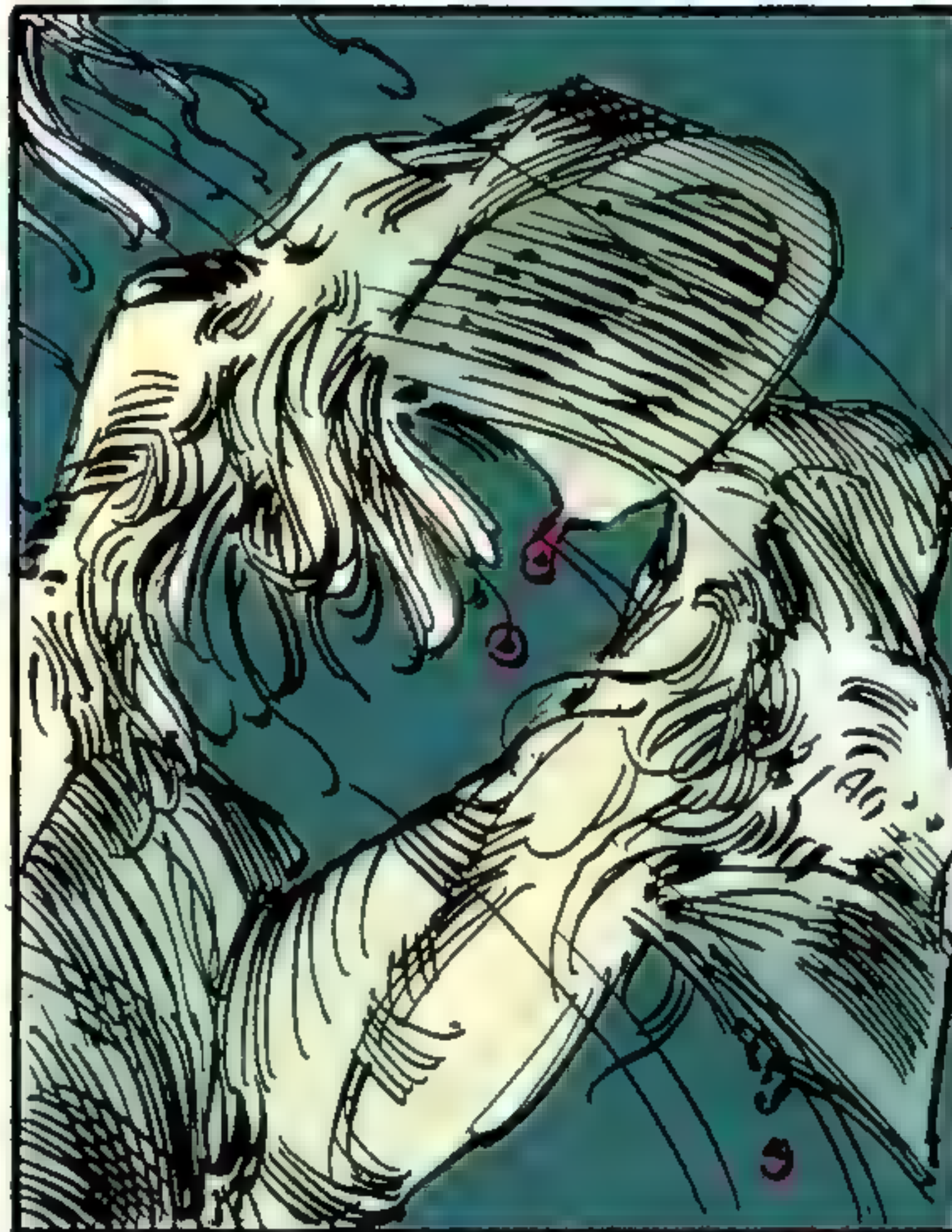


...THEY HEAR THE MOST HORRIBLE SCREAMS.

BASIL, THEY SAY THE SCREAMS COME FROM BENEATH THE GROUND.



URSULA, LOOK OUT!

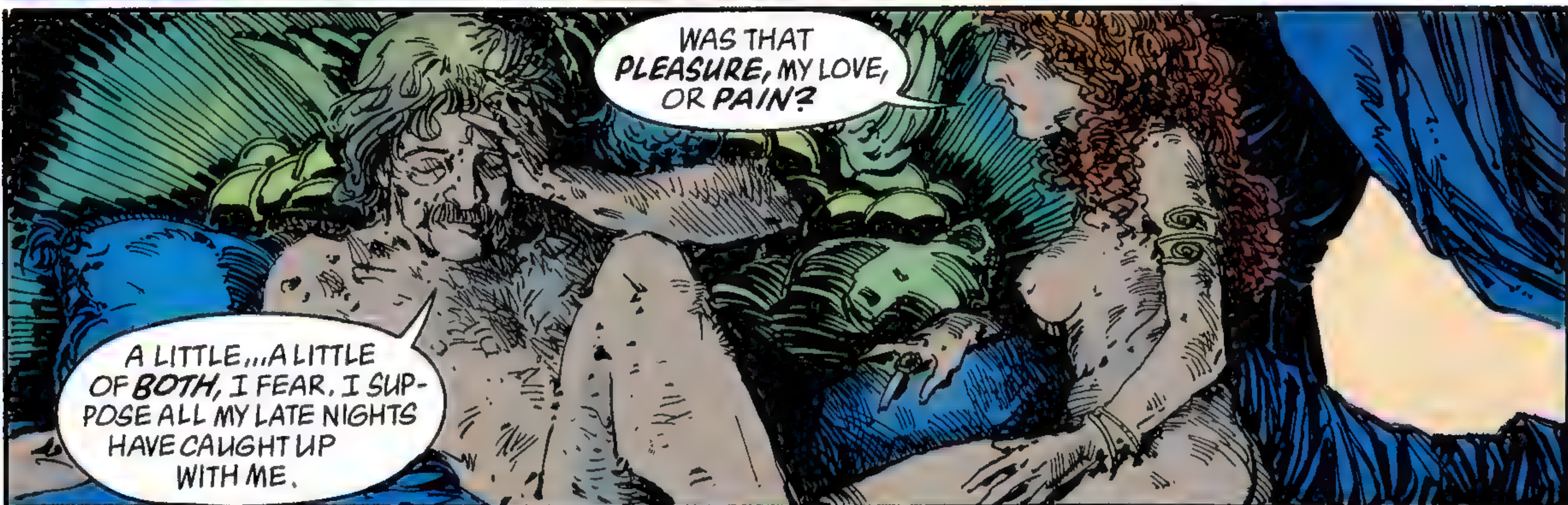
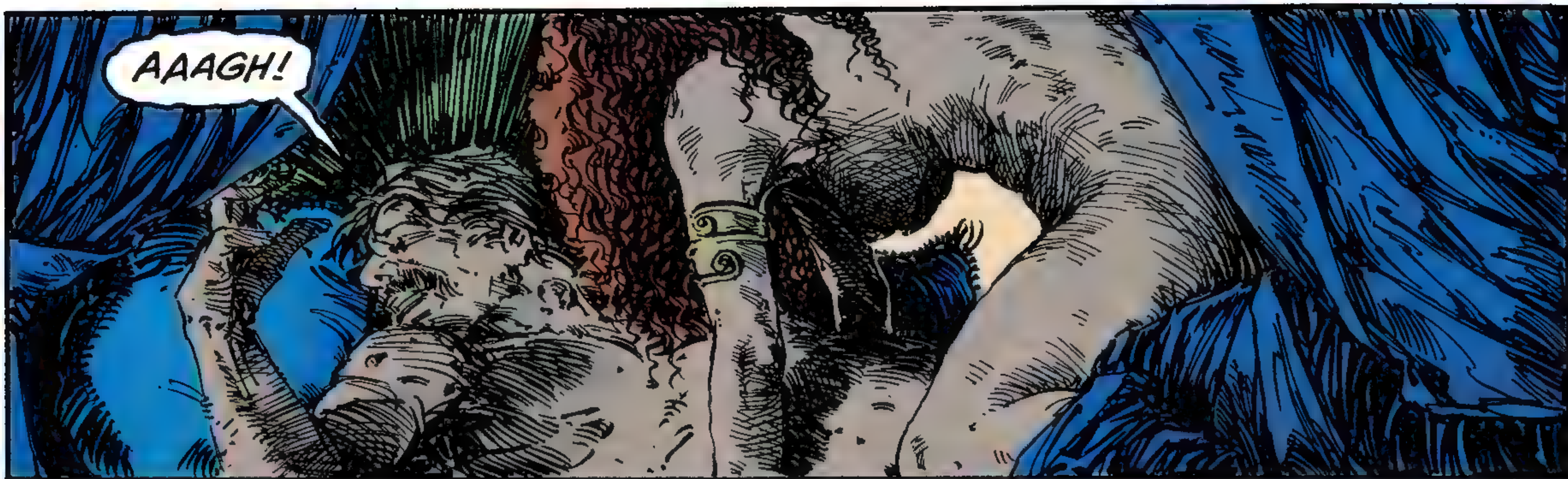


URSULA...?

URSULA?

UNNGH...

HE'S GONE.





IF YOU DON'T COME SOON, YOUR FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS WILL HAVE THE BEST OF YOUR SUPPER.

MY FRIENDS HAVE BEEN POORLY OFF LATE.



TELL ME, WHAT CRUELTY MAKES YOU WANT TO KEEP ME ALIVE DOWN HERE? YOUR BREASTS MUST BE FILLED WITH THE POISONOUS MILK OF SNAKES.

DO NOT BLAME ME FOR THIS. YOU FORCED MY HAND BY COMING HERE!



PERHAPS I DID. OR PERHAPS IT WAS DESTINY.

I HAVE SEEN HIM, YOU KNOW. HE LOOKS LIKE ONE OF THOSE HOLY MEN THAT DRESS IN SACKCLOTH AND LIVE IN CAVES.

YOU MUST BE GOING MAD.

THERE IS NO ONE DOWN HERE BUT YOURSELF.



OH, NO, MOTHER. EVEN WHEN WE ARE MOST ALONE, THE SEVEN ARE ALWAYS WITH US. I HAVE SEEN DESPAIR IN THE EYES OF THE RATS. DREAM COMES WHEN THE SHADOWS ARE DARKEST, AND SOMETIMES DELIRIUM ATTENDS HIM.

I HAVE EVEN FELT DESIRE DOWN HERE, IN THE DARK WITH NO COMFORT BUT MYSELF; BUT IT WAS DEATH I COURTED, AND WANTED FOR MY OWN.



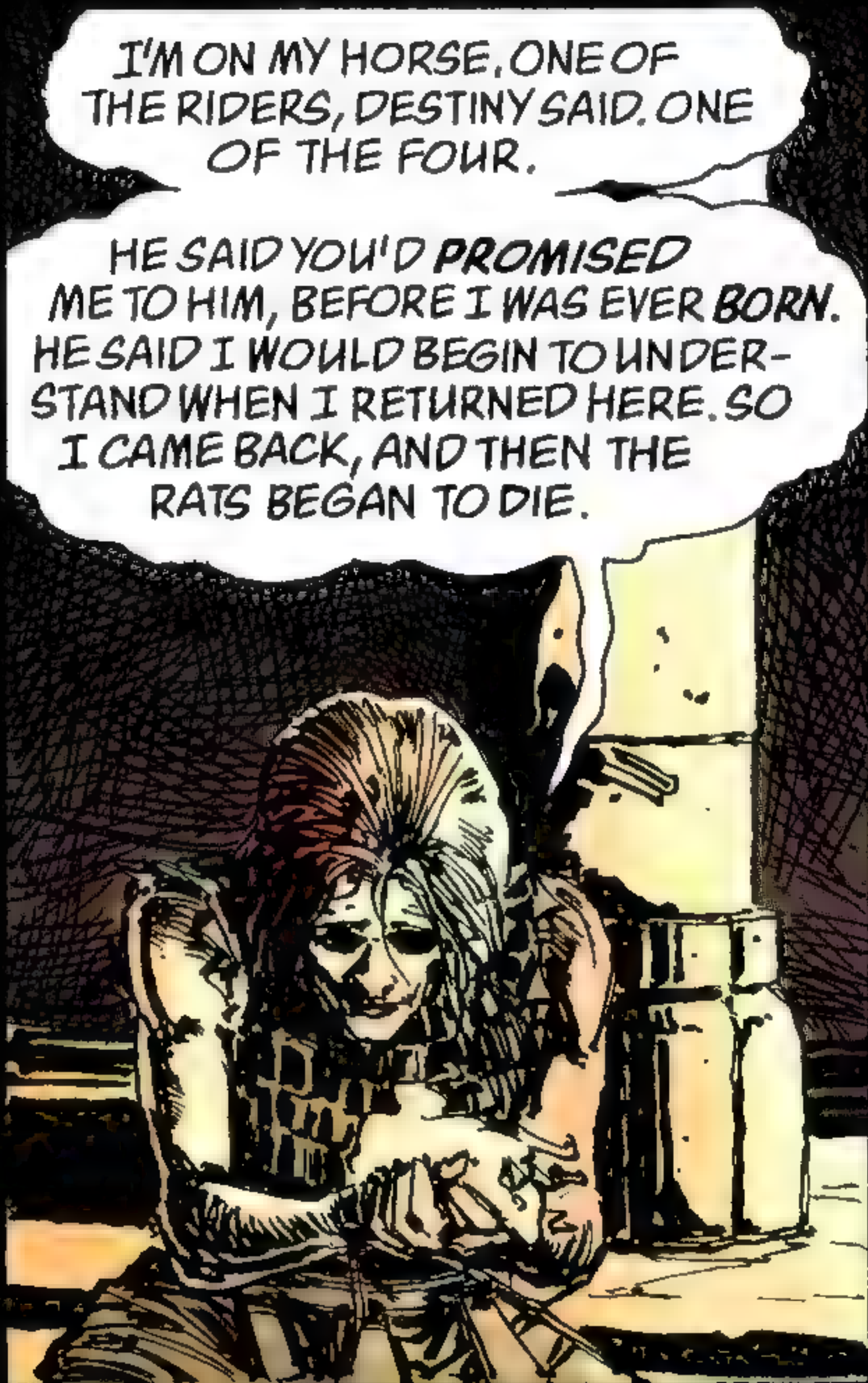
AND THEN DESTRUCTION CAME AND REMINDED ME THAT LABYRINTHS ARE BEST WALKED THROUGH BLIND.

THAT'S HOW I FOUND MY WAY TO DESTINY'S GARDEN.



WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

THERE'S A STATUE OF YOU THERE. AND THERE'S A STATUE OF ME, AS WELL.



I'M ON MY HORSE, ONE OF THE RIDERS, DESTINY SAID. ONE OF THE FOUR.

HE SAID YOU'D **PROMISED** ME TO HIM, BEFORE I WAS EVER **BORN**. HE SAID I WOULD BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND WHEN I RETURNED HERE. SO I CAME BACK, AND THEN THE RATS BEGAN TO DIE.



THEY STARTED TO MOVE MORE SLOWLY, AND THEN--IT WAS SO STRANGE, MOTHER-- AS THEY GOT SICKER, I BEGAN TO **UNDERSTAND** THEM.



THEN I BEGAN TO HEAR THE **OTHERS**.

WHAT--WHAT OTHERS?

THERE ARE SO MANY, MOTHER. SO MANY VOICES SPEAKING SO MANY DIFFERENT TONGUES. EGYPTIAN, HEBREW, PERSIAN, GREEK.



SOMETIMES THEY BABBLE AND ASK FOR THEIR GODS, SOMETIMES THEY ASK FOR THEIR MOTHERS OR WIVES...

LIKE YOUR **HUSBAND**, WHO IS CALLING FOR YOU NOW...



LIAR!!!

I WILL LEAVE YOU TO DIE DOWN HERE!

SMACK



BUT I **CAN'T** DIE, MOTHER. NOT YET. I HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL THE VERY END. UNTIL ALMOST THE END.



"I HAVE TO WAIT FOR THE GIRL IN WHITE."



I AM DYING.

NO, MY LOVE, NO.

BELISARIUS WILL BE CROWNED AUGUSTUS. IT IS GOD'S WILL.



THEN GOD BE DAMNED, FOR IT IS NOT MY WILL.



THEY SAY JUSTINIAN WILL NOT **LAST** THE WEEK.

THEN I SAY APPOINT BELISARIUS EMPEROR NOW. BUT WHERE DOES YOUR LOYALTY LIE, CONSTANTINE?

WITH MY **OWN** BEST INTERESTS, BUZES.



PROCOPIUS. I'D KNOW YOUR SHRILL VOICE ANYWHERE. BUZES, I SHALL BE SURE TO RELATE TO MY HUSBAND YOUR **KIND** CONCERNS FOR HIS HEALTH.

AUGUSTA, I ONLY MEANT,,,

I THINK YOUR MEANING WAS PLAIN ENOUGH.



AS FOR YOU, CONSTANTINE, YOU'RE JUST THE MAN I NEED TO SEE. **ALONE**.

I'M FLATTERED.



IT **GALLS** ME THAT I MUST BOW TO THAT LOWBORN **SLUT**.

IT WILL GALL US BOTH FAR WORSE IF THE EMPEROR RECOVERS. **YOU** ONLY REPEATED GOSSIP: IT WAS **I** SPOKE OF **TREASON**.

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME, THEO, SINCE WE WERE **ALONE**. YOU'VE BEEN SURPRISINGLY FAITHFUL SINCE THAT FEEBLE OLD MAN MADE IT LEGAL.

BUT NOW THAT JUSTINIAN'S **AILING**, AND YOUR BELLY IS STILL AS **FLAT** AS A PRIEST'S SERMON...

WHY **IS** IT THAT PEOPLE ALWAYS DESPISE POWERFUL MEN WHO FALL IN LOVE?

IN ANY CASE, THE ANSWER IS NO, I DO NOT WANT TO PUT **ANOTHER** BASTARD CONSTANTINE ON THIS EARTH. WHAT I WANT OF **YOU** IS THE USE OF YOUR **OTHER** TALENT.

I MAY HAVE SPENT MY **YOUTH** ON MY KNEES BEFORE MEN, BUT JUSTINIAN MARRIED ME AND NOW MEN BOW BEFORE **ME**. MY HUSBAND **MUST** GET WELL, AND THEY SAY YOU KNOW THE DARK ARTS...

I MIGHT. BUT OTHERS KNOW THEM, TOO. WHY NOT TRY ANTONINA AGAIN?

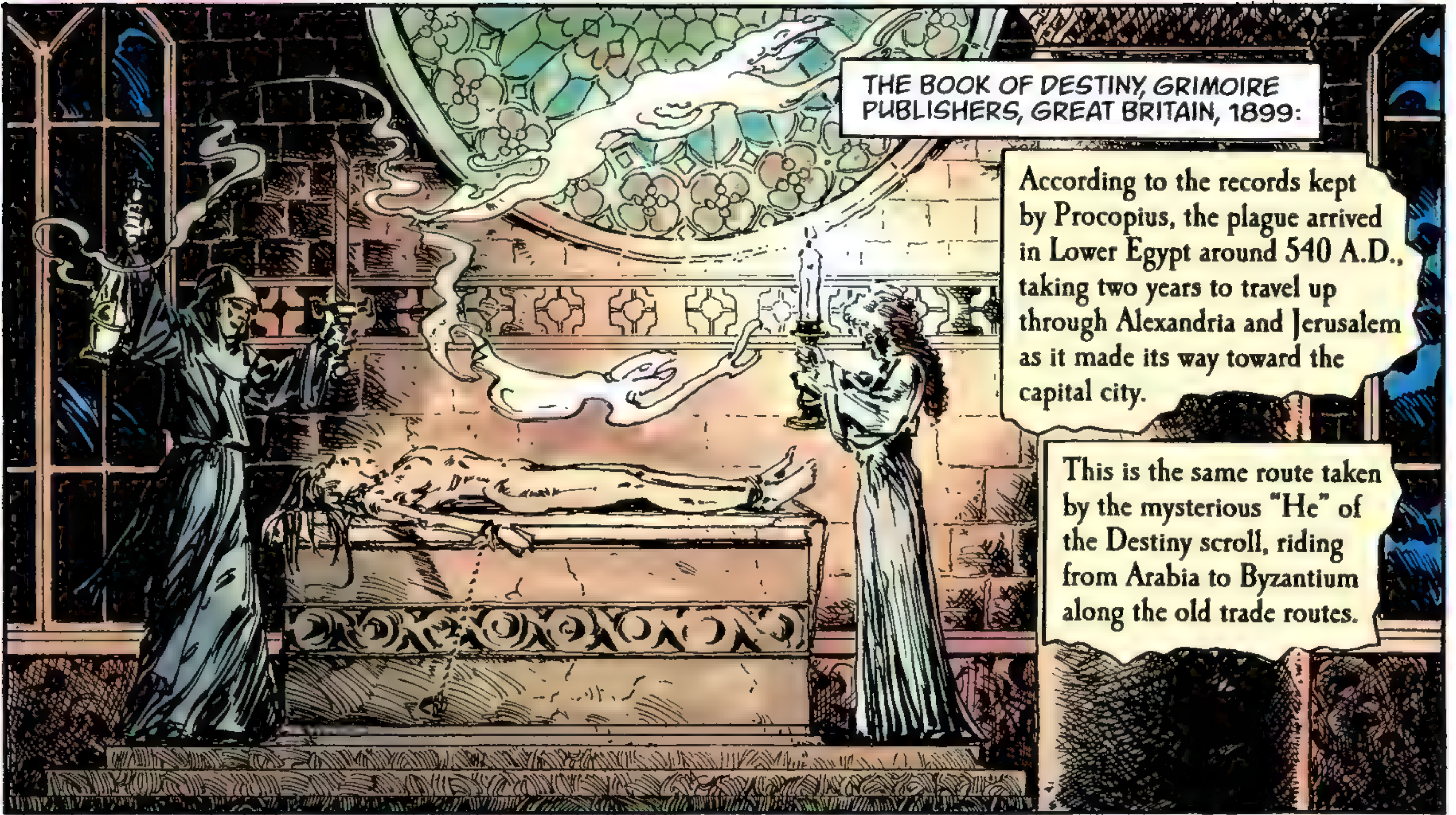
YOU KNOW OF THAT? AH, WELL.

ANTONINA MAY BE A STUPID COW, BUT EVEN **SHE** MIGHT COMPREHEND THAT **NOT** HELPING ME NOW MIGHT SEE HER CROWNED AUGUSTA.

HELP ME, CONSTANTINE, AND YOU WILL HAVE **ANYTHING** YOUR HEART DESIRES.

I **HAVE** ALWAYS WANTED TO BE MADE **QUAESTOR**... I HAVE A FONDNESS FOR DEALING WITH **OTHER** PEOPLE'S MONEY.

NOW... I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU KNOW OF A **YOUNG VIRGIN** WE COULD BORROW FOR THE NIGHT?



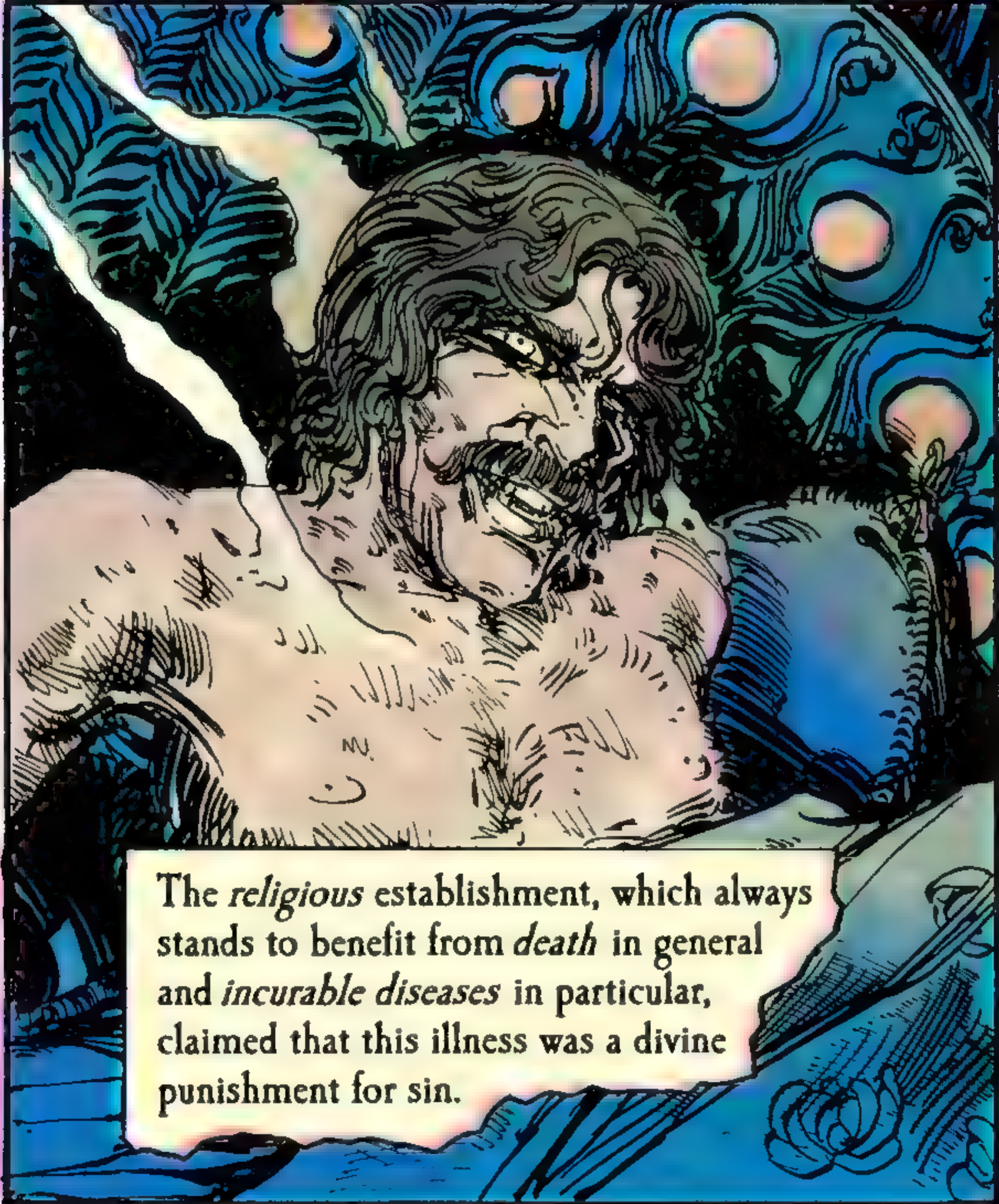
THE BOOK OF DESTINY, GRIMOIRE PUBLISHERS, GREAT BRITAIN, 1899:

According to the records kept by Procopius, the plague arrived in Lower Egypt around 540 A.D., taking two years to travel up through Alexandria and Jerusalem as it made its way toward the capital city.

This is the same route taken by the mysterious "He" of the Destiny scroll, riding from Arabia to Byzantium along the old trade routes.



At first, the frightened populace turned to the Greek healers, *trained* in the disciplines of Galen and Hippocrates. Yet it soon became apparent that, in the words of the old saying, the physicians could not even heal themselves.



The *religious* establishment, which always stands to benefit from *death* in general and *incurable diseases* in particular, claimed that this illness was a divine punishment for sin.



The sin must have been *grievous* indeed: The punishment claimed some ten thousand souls a day in Constantinople alone.

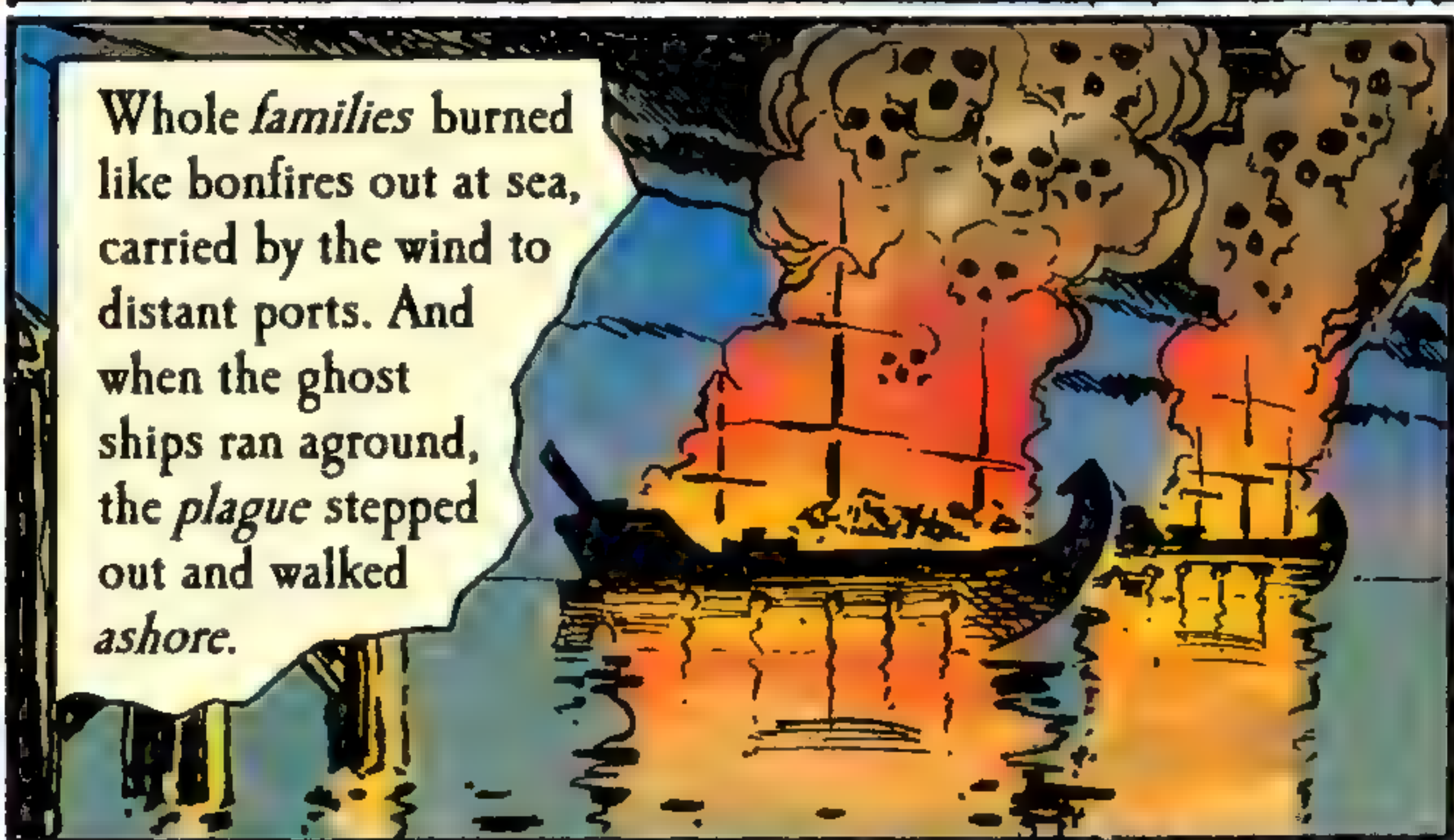
Yet *Justinian* recovered.



The emperor ordered that the infectious corpses, too numerous to bury, be stacked in tower buildings, or cast onto barges and set adrift.



Despite these precautions, the plague raged on.



Whole families burned like bonfires out at sea, carried by the wind to distant ports. And when the ghost ships ran aground, the *plague* stepped out and walked ashore.



It is difficult to imagine a hundred dead, harder still to picture a thousand. *One hundred million* died during the plague of Justinian.



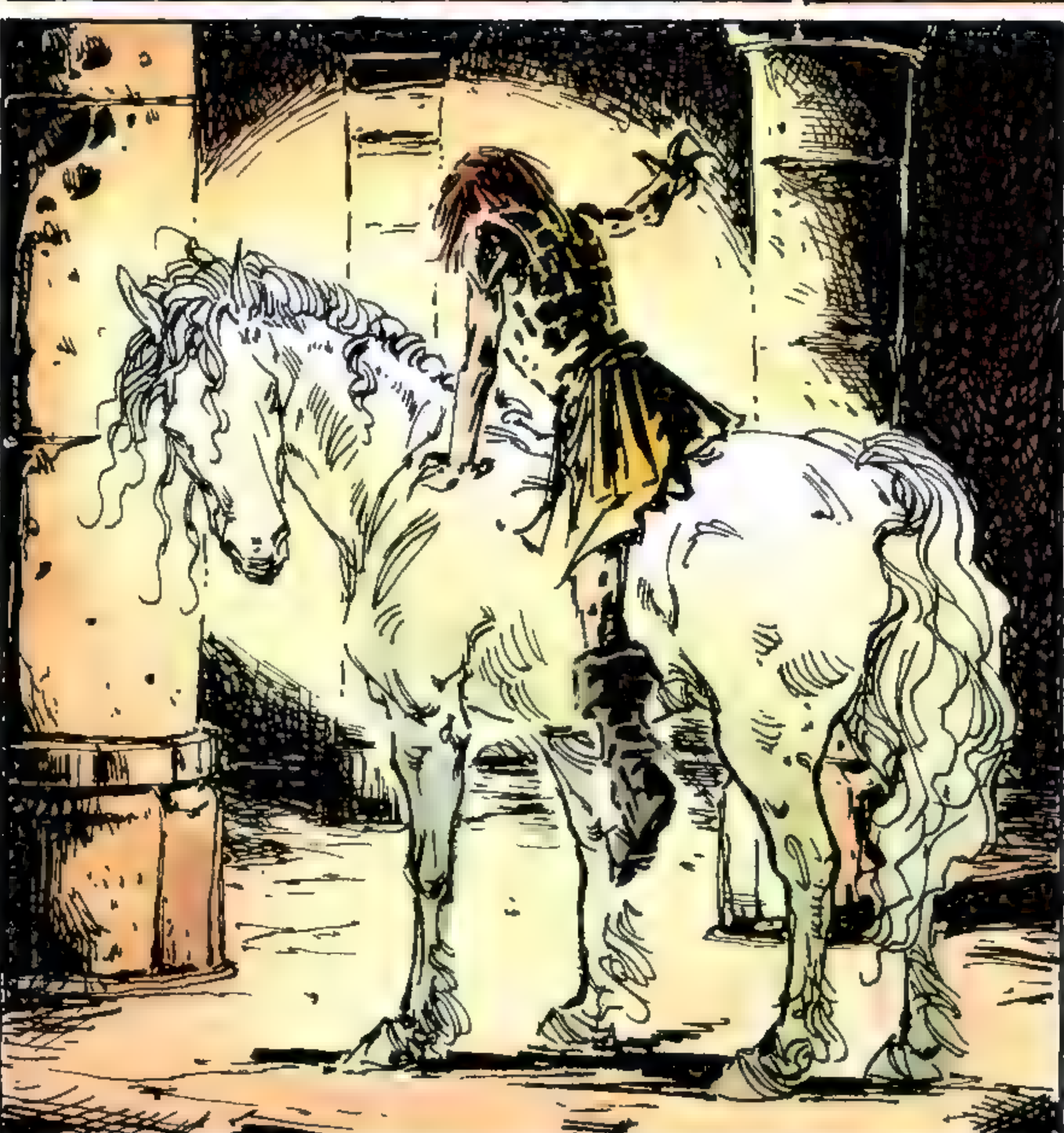
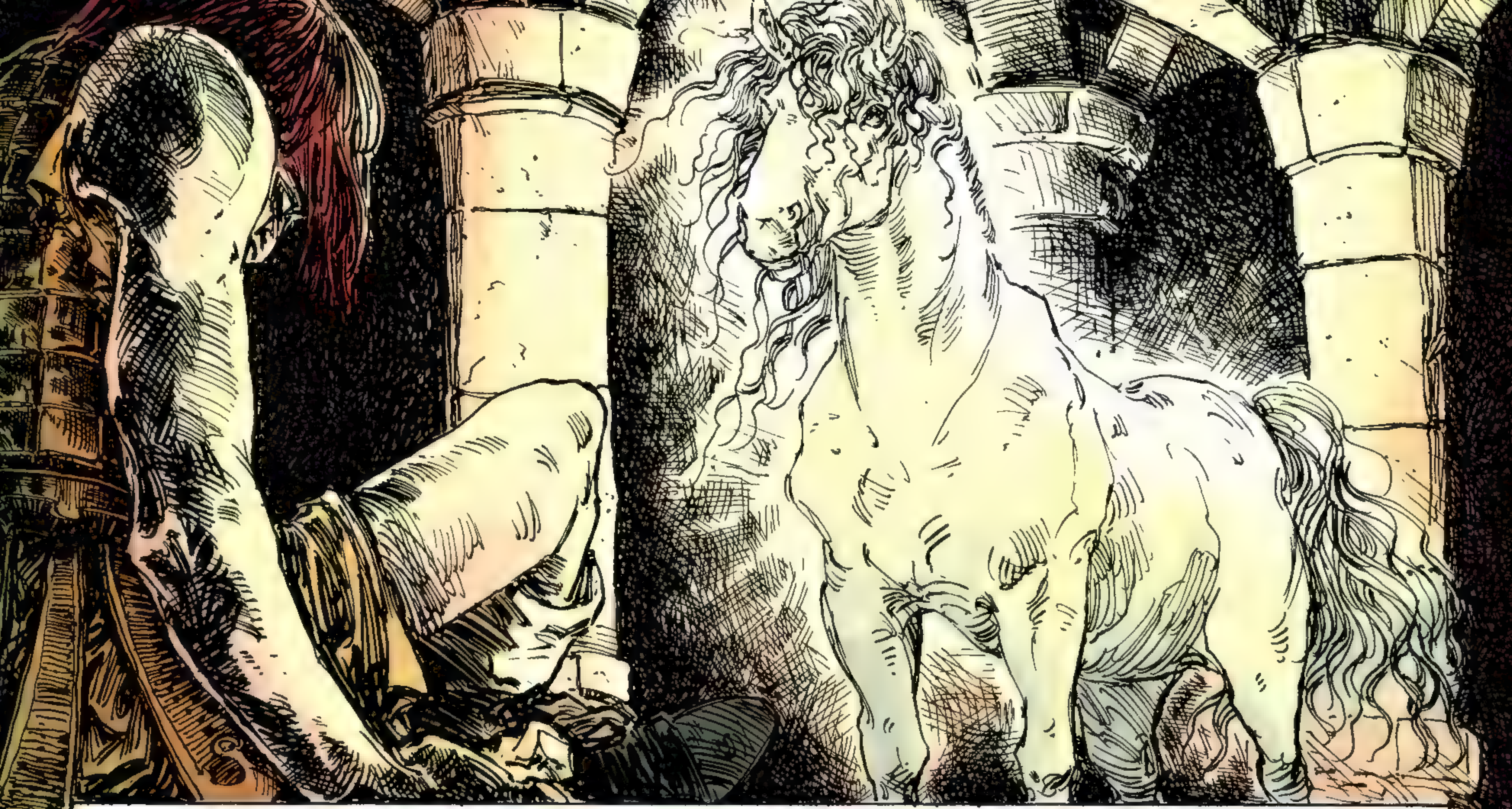
And legend says *He* heard them all.

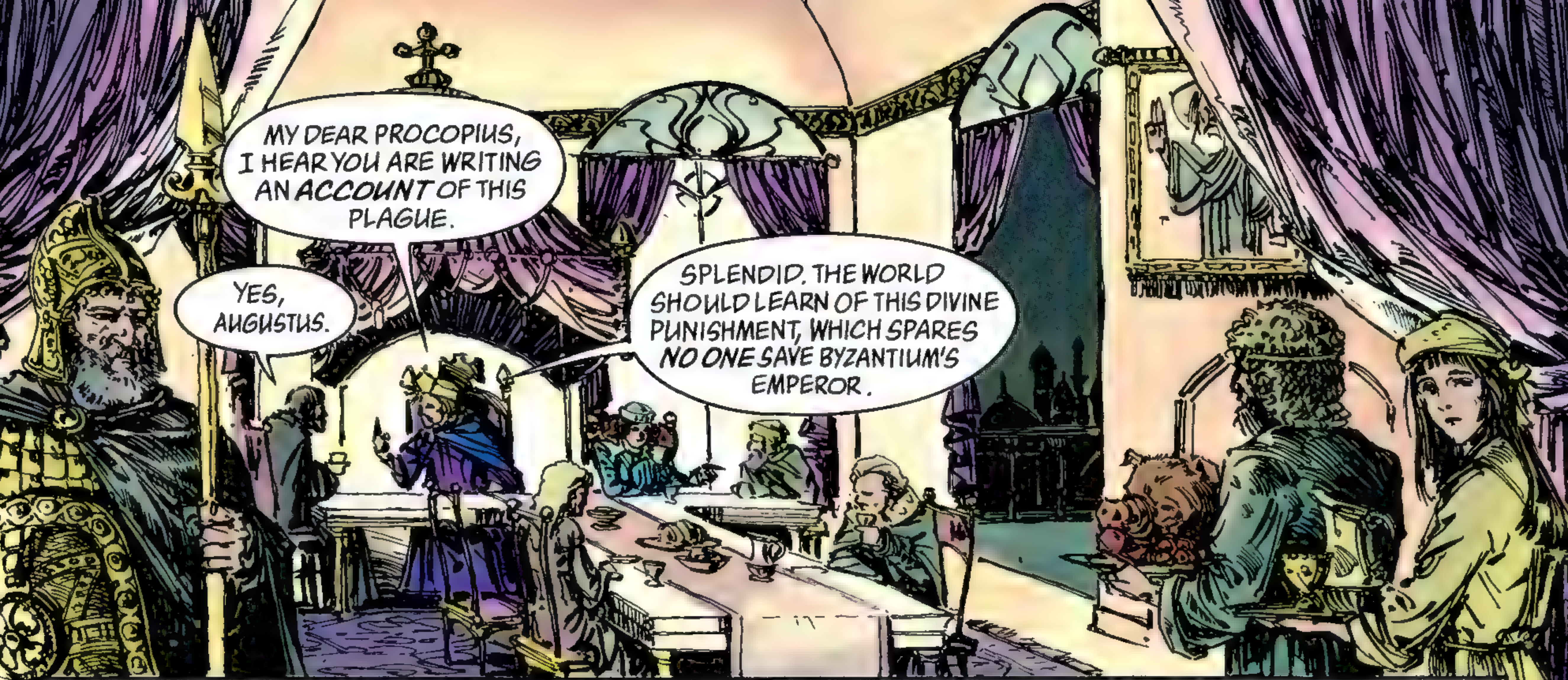


He heard them when they felt the first *fleshless* touch, the gentle tap upon the coffin of the skin.

He heard them when they felt the swelling erupt beneath the flesh, the *flowering* of the pestilence, rose red and violet blue.

He heard *mothers* curse their *infants*, dropping them like spoiled cabbage on the street. He heard *priests* repudiate their God, saying Jesus was never born of mortal *woman*, and never suffered *mortal* pain.

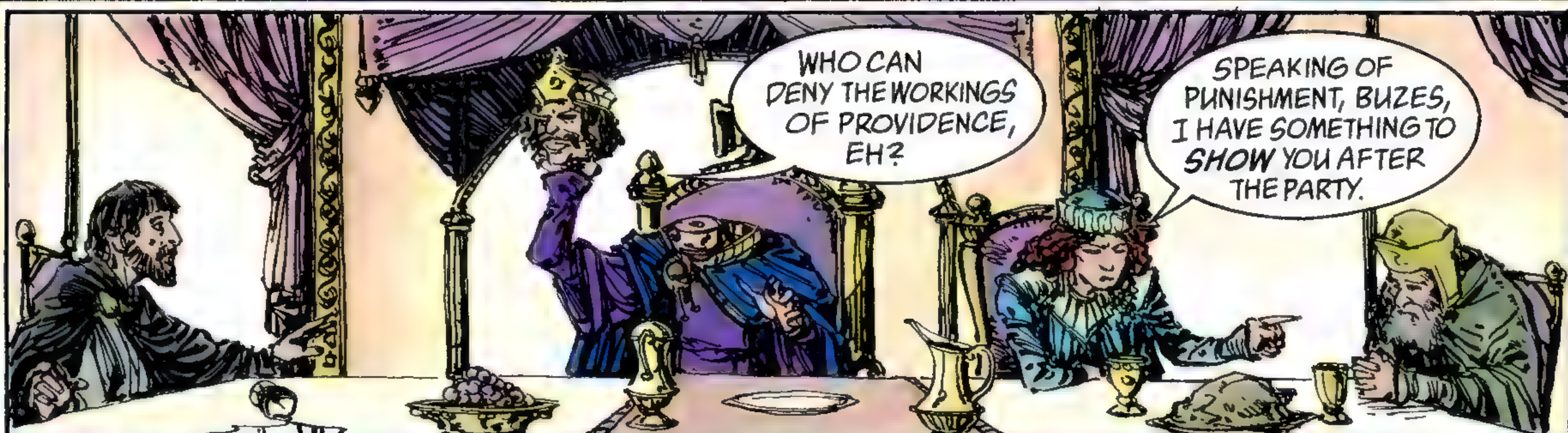




MY DEAR PROCOPIUS,
I HEAR YOU ARE WRITING
AN ACCOUNT OF THIS
PLAGUE.

YES,
AUGUSTUS.

SPLENDID. THE WORLD
SHOULD LEARN OF THIS DIVINE
PUNISHMENT, WHICH SPARES
NO ONE SAVE BYZANTIUM'S
EMPEROR.



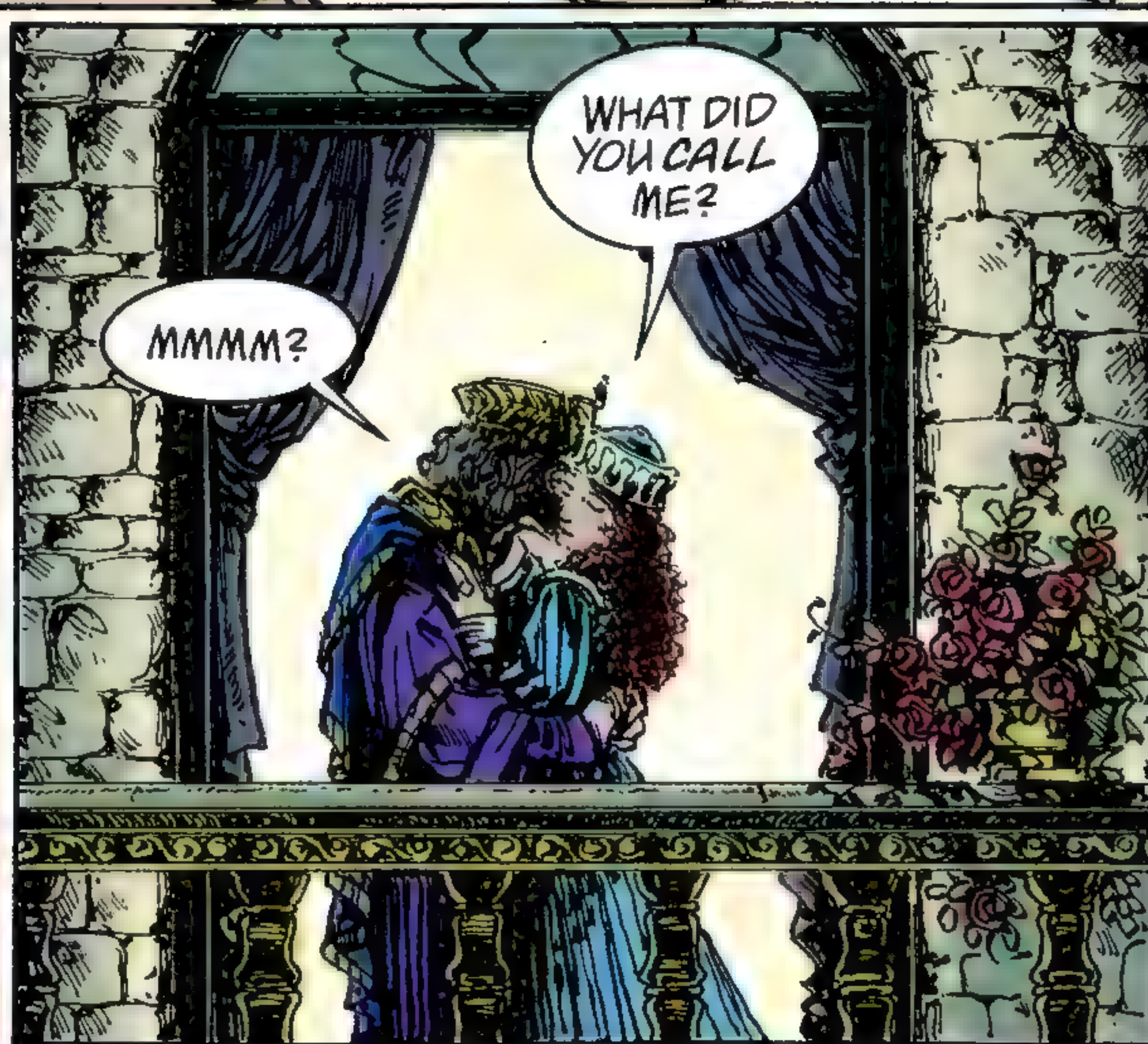
WHO CAN
DENY THE WORKINGS
OF PROVIDENCE,
EH?

SPEAKING OF
PUNISHMENT, BUZES,
I HAVE SOMETHING TO
SHOW YOU AFTER
THE PARTY.



DO NOT
OVERTAX YOURSELF,
BELOVED.

OF
COURSE NOT,
'DORA.



WHAT DID
YOU CALL
ME?

MMMM?



YOU HAVE SUCH
DELICIOUS SKIN.
ONE WOULD HARDLY
GUESS THAT YOU
ARE NO LONGER
YOUNG.



I FIND MYSELF GROWING QUITE
IMPATIENT WITH THESE CEREMONIES.
SHALL I TAKE YOU ON THE HIGH ALTAR
OF THE HAGHIA SOPHIA, WHERE YOU
DESECRATED GOD'S TEMPLE TO
SPARE MY LIFE?

YOUR
VOICE... IS SO
STRANGE...



YOU--
YOU ARE **NOT** MY
HUSBAND.

NOT
ENTIRELY,
NO.

AH, THERE
YOU ARE, YOU TWO
LOVEBIRDS.



CAN'T WAIT A MINUTE
MORE TO BE ALONE, HUH?
THAT'S TRUE LOVE FOR
YOU, ALL RIGHT.

WHAT
DO YOU WANT,
CONSTANTINE?



AT THE MOMENT,
JUST A **WORD** WITH YOUR
WIFE. ANY OBJECTIONS?



NOT A ONE, MY DEAR
CONSTANTINE. AFTER ALL,
WE OWE YOU OUR **LIFE**,
DO WE NOT?



OH, THAT'S A
NASTY ONE, THAT IS.
I THOUGHT I'D WARN
YOU-- YOU'D BEST
WATCH OUT FOR
HIM.



CONSTANTINE, I
SHOULD HAVE YOU FLAYED ALIVE
FOR THIS! YOU SAID THE DEMON
WAS SUPPOSED TO **HEAL**
HIM AND THEN **LEAVE**.

WELL, THAT
WAS THE PLAN. BUT
IT SEEMS JUSTINIAN
WAS A LITTLE TOO
FAR GONE TO FIGHT
HIM OFF.



WELL, YOU SUMMONED THE DEMON, SO NOW YOU HAVE TO GET RID OF HIM.



SORRY, THEO, BUT SOME THINGS ARE A LOT EASIER TO GET IN THAN OUT. I HAVE NO IDEA HOW YOU SEND A DEMON-EMPEROR ANYWHERE HE DOESN'T WANT TO GO.



YOU MEAN... YOU MEAN YOU CAN'T BRING MY HUSBAND BACK?



OH... GOD...

IF IT'S ANY CONSOLATION, JUSTINIAN IS IN THERE SOMEWHERE. HE'S JUST... NOT IN CONTROL.



OH, SHUT UP, CONSTANTINE. I'M NOT GOING TO GIVE SOME DEMON SQUATTING RIGHTS IN MY HUSBAND'S BODY. IF YOU CAN'T HELP ME, I'LL JUST GO TO SOMEONE WHO CAN.



COME ALONG, BUZES. SAY GOOD-BYE TO YOUR FRIENDS.

I'M ON MY WAY TO MEET DESTINY, AND YOU'RE GOING TO ACCOMPANY ME.



YOU'RE--YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LEAVE ME ALONE HERE IN THE DARK, ARE YOU, AUGUSTA?

ISN'T THAT A FITTING REWARD FOR THE MAN WHO SCHEMED AGAINST THE EMPEROR? BUT DON'T WORRY-- I'LL BE MERCIFUL.



YOU CAN HAVE THE TORCH.



BUT YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT I HAVE IT ON GOOD AUTHORITY THAT TO FIND YOUR WAY OUT OF HERE...

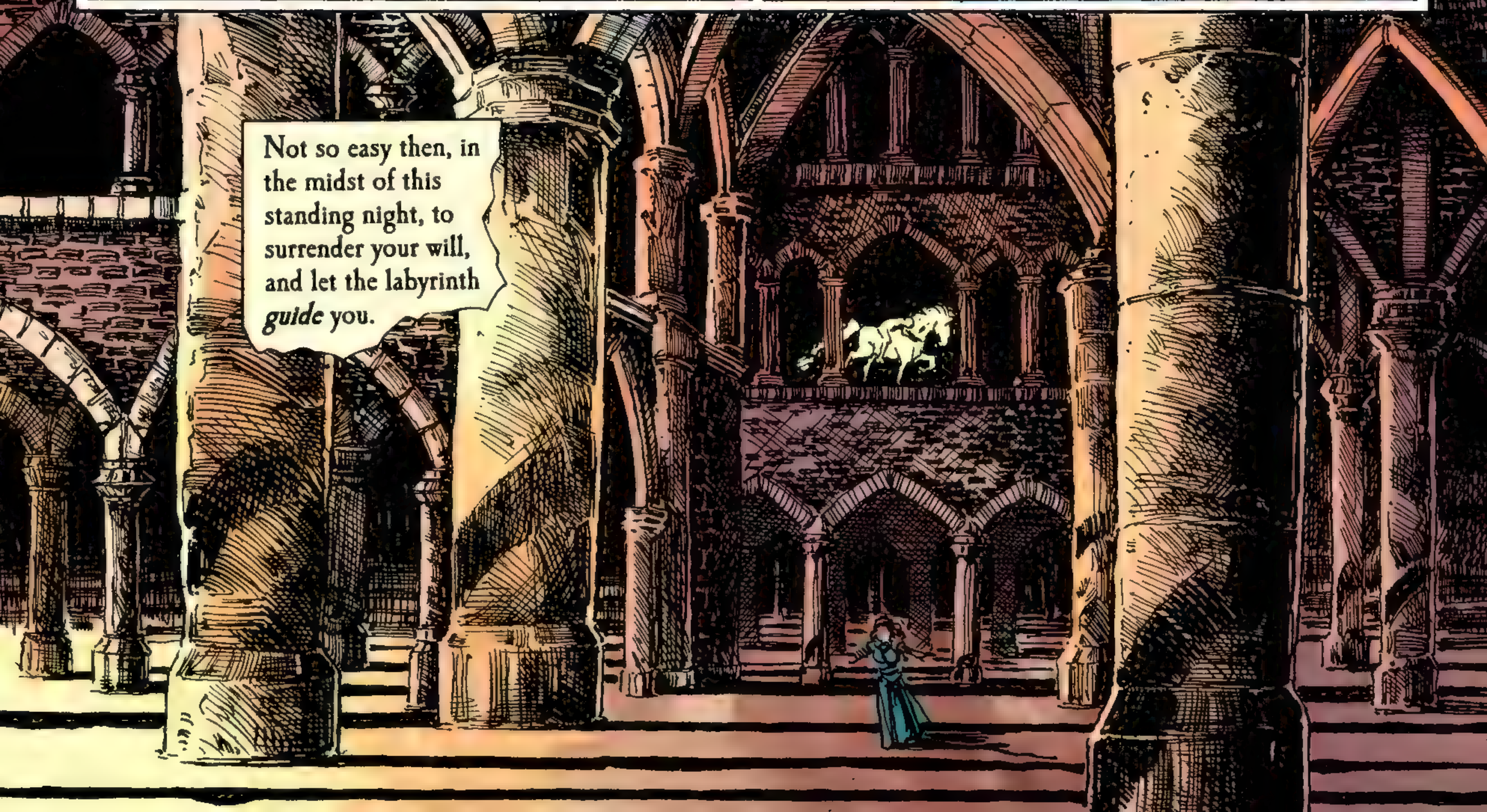


...YOU HAVE TO GO BLIND.



THE BOOK OF DESTINY, GRIMOIRE PUBLISHERS:

Try to imagine the absolute darkness of a dungeon: the slippery feel of the air as it rushes against the skin, the sense of sharp edges and other *unseen* dangers.



Not so easy then, in the midst of this standing night, to surrender your will, and let the labyrinth guide you.



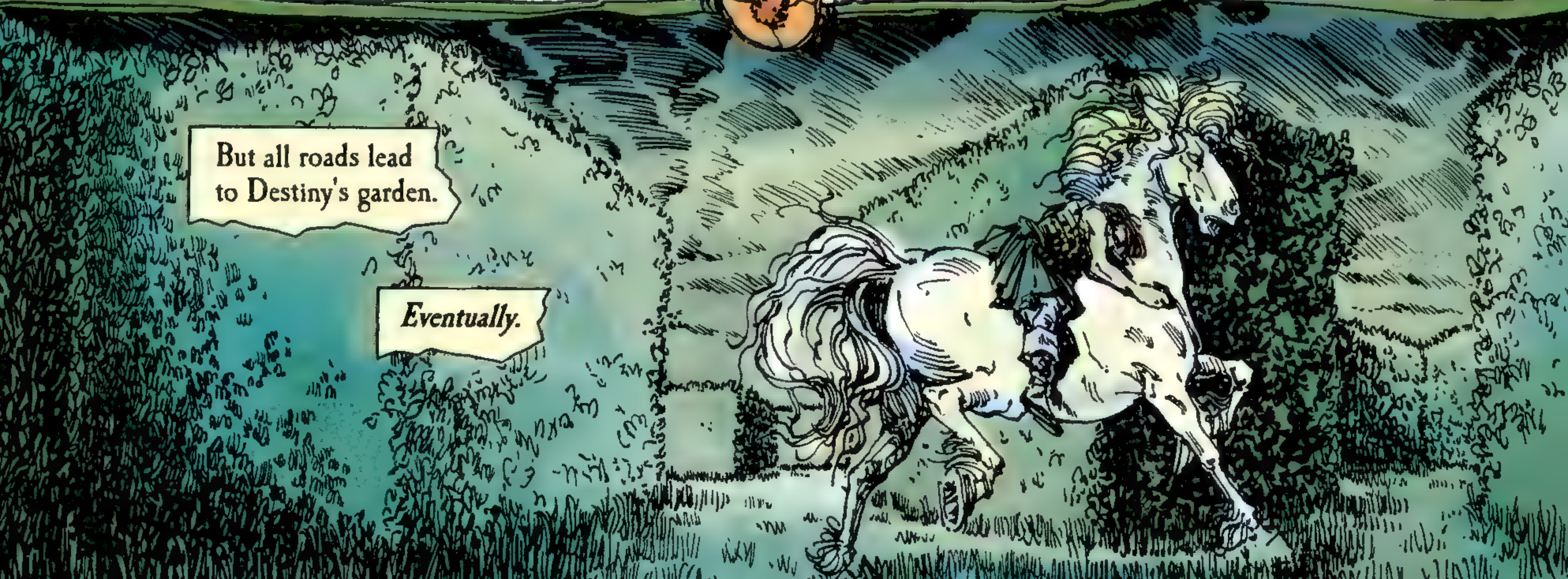
Where the path forks,
you may find yourself in
the abandoned byways
of the past.



Where the past is lost,
you may wander through
the burial ground of
forgotten years.



And here and there,
unborn ghosts may
haunt the borderlands
between cradle and
grave.

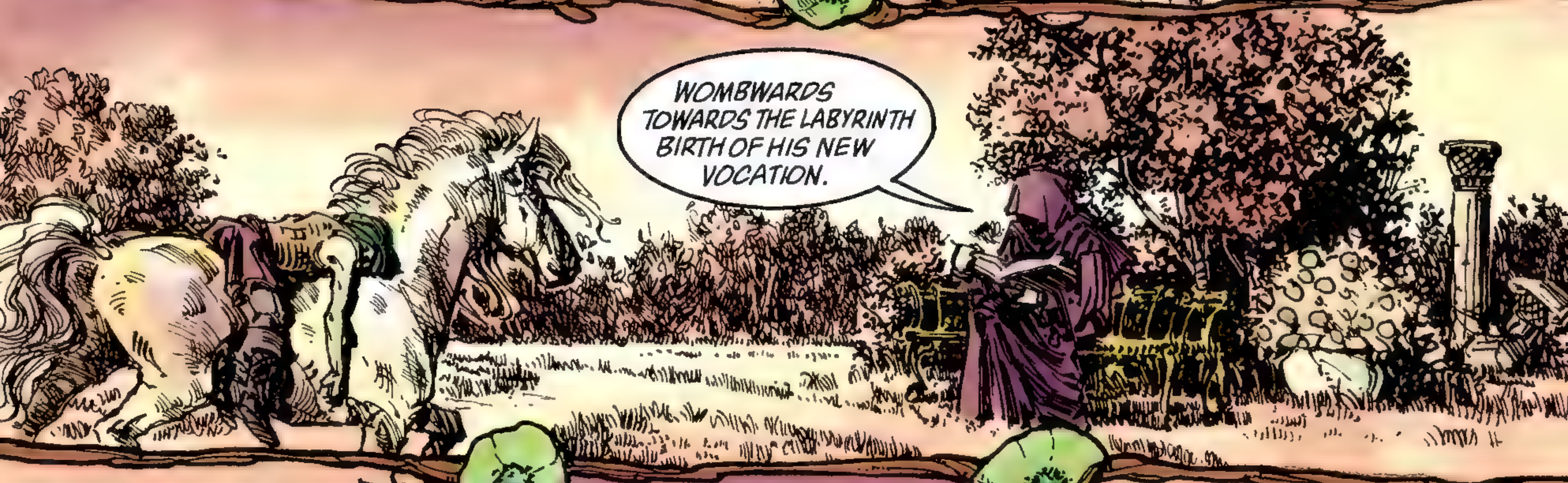


But all roads lead
to Destiny's garden.

Eventually.



EAST OF THE SUN
AND WEST OF THE MOON,
BETWIXT DOG AND WOLF,
HE SHALL RIDE.



WOMBWARDS
TOWARDS THE LABYRINTH
BIRTH OF HIS NEW
VOCATION.



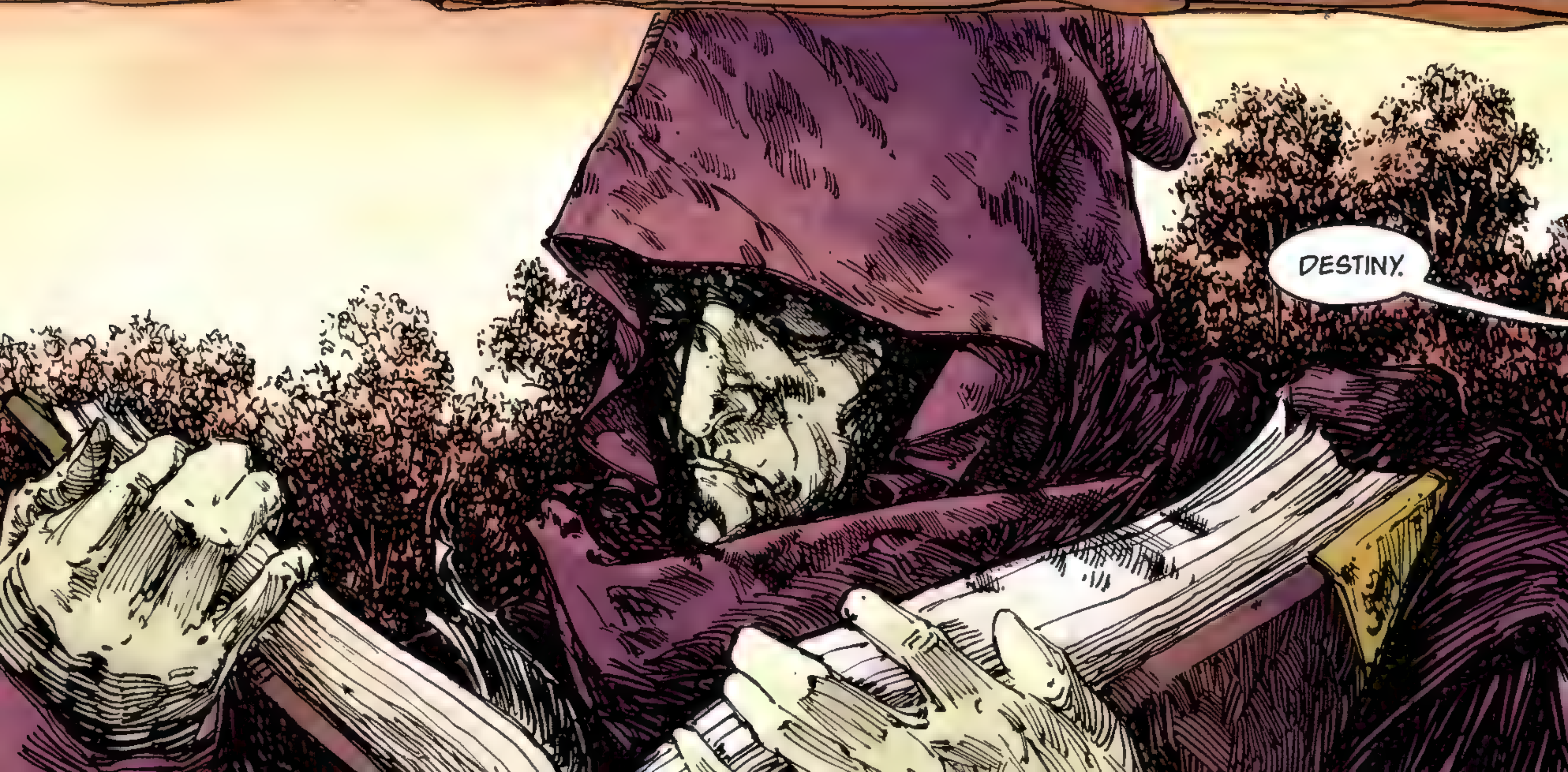
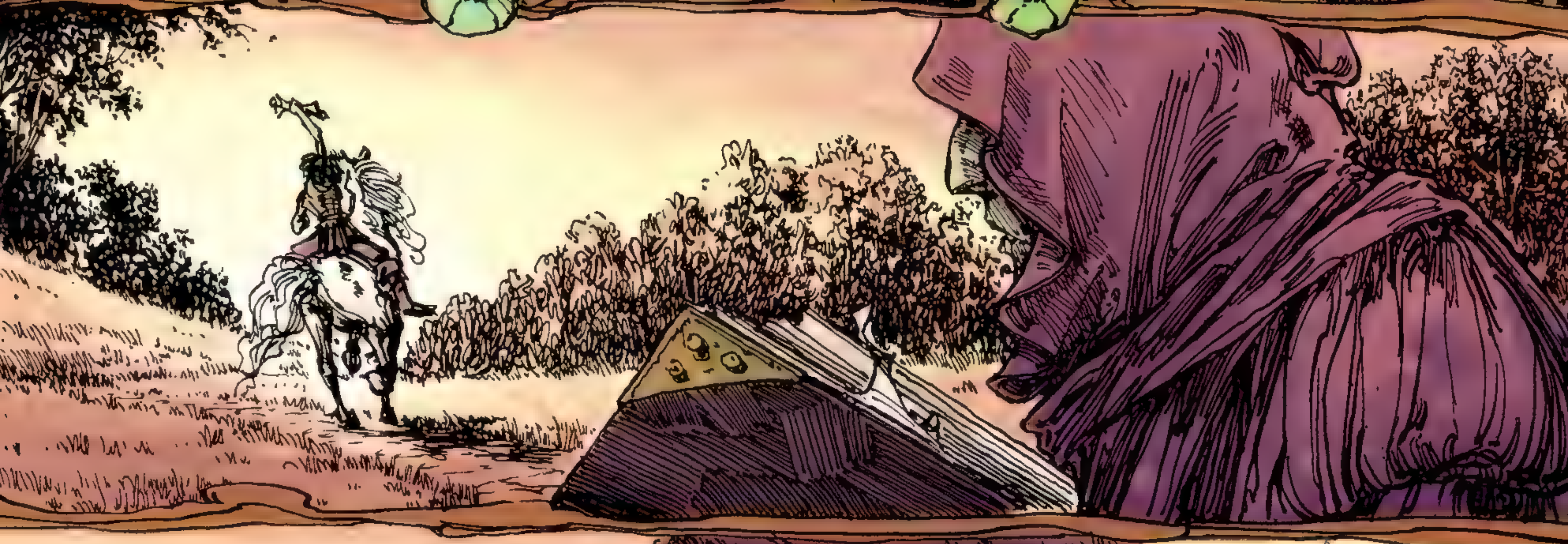
NOW I
LOOK UP FROM
MY BOOK.



AND TOUCH
YOUR FACE, THINKING
YOU ARE DEAD.



BUT YOU
ARE NOT
DEAD.





MY SON SAID HE CAME TO YOU IN A GARDEN, BUT THIS PLACE SEEMS MORE LIKE A GRAVEYARD TO ME.

YOU WERE IN MY DREAMS NOT LONG AGO.

YES.



AND BEFORE THAT, YOU CAME TO ME WHEN I WAS IN THE BROTHEL. YOU TOLD ME THAT IF I GAVE YOU A SON, YOU WOULD MAKE ME EMPRESS.

NO. YOU ASSUMED THOSE THINGS.



BUT YOU TOLD ME I'D BEAR YOU A SON! AND THEN YOU WOULDN'T TOUCH ME.

SO I LET THAT SOLDIER GET ME PREGNANT.

TO BEAR A SON FOR YOU. I THOUGHT THAT WAS OUR DEAL.



DESTINY DOES NOT STRIKE BARGAINS. DO YOU NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT I AM?

I SEE THE END IN EVERY BEGINNING. I HEAR THE LAST WORD ECHO IN THE FIRST. I DO NOT DESIRE, OR DREAM, OR DESTROY. I DO NOT DESPAIR, OR DELIGHT. I KNOW.



HOW DO YOU BEAR IT?



THAT IS WHY THIS BOOK EXISTS: TO CARRY THE KNOWLEDGE WITH ME, AND NOT INSIDE ME.



AND SOMETIMES I SHARE A FRACTION OF THAT KNOWLEDGE, AS I DID WITH YOU.

YET THE BOOK IS A BURDEN, TOO. IT WILL NOT BE PUT DOWN. IT MUST BE READ, CONSTANTLY READ. ITS PAGES ARE RESTLESS BENEATH MY HANDS.

AT TIMES, I HEAR THEM FLUTTERING LIKE BATWINGS, AS IF THEY WISH TO FLY AWAY FROM HERE.

SO I TURNED TO THE FOUR, TO BE SENT FORTH AS EMISSARIES.

IS THAT WHAT JOHN IS? ONE OF THE FOUR?

YES, THOUGH HE HAS SET HIMSELF AGAINST ME, BUT THEN I KNEW THAT HE WOULD.

BUT YOU SAID YOU KNEW EVERYTHING.

I DO.

AND HE HAS DONE SOMETHING UNEXPECTED AS WELL.

I KNEW HE WAS GOING TO SURPRISE ME.

THEN--THEN PERHAPS MY SON HAS PLEASSED YOU. AND PERHAPS I HAVE PLEASSED YOU, TOO--OR ELSE WHY COME TO ME WHEN I WAS WRETCHED, AND OFFER ME HOPE?

IF YOU DO HAVE ANY FONDNESS FOR ME, I BEG OF YOU, COULD YOU TELL ME...

WHAT IS TO BECOME OF ME NOW?

Here legend leaves off, leaving us to the drier, but no less dubious, claims of history.

Theodora died some five years after the events of this account. Most believe that cancer, not plague, claimed her life.

Justinian, whom the historian Procopius called Lord of the Demons, retained his corporeal tenure for nearly twenty more years.

He was succeeded by Justin II, called the Noseless after Justinian had him punished accordingly.

As for Byzantium, it never recovered from the grim gifts of the pestilence. Gradually, inexorably, the lengthening shadow of a new epoch settled over the abandoned villages of the old empire, and by the time the carrion stench of the plague victims had faded away, the Dark Ages had truly begun.

--LORCAN CAVENDISH, EDITOR.
THE BOOK OF DESTINY, GRIMOIRE
PUBLISHERS, GREAT BRITAIN, 1899.

OCTOBER 22, 2009:
FROM THE JOURNAL
OF RUTH KNIGHT:

When Ryder finished
the last sentence, there
was complete silence.
No one moved for a
moment, and then
someone said it
must be getting
dark outside.

It had been so long since any of us went
to a movie, we'd forgotten what it was
like—letting someone else's story
take over your thoughts for a
while.

It was only when we
left the church that I
realized we'd been
keeping the feral children
from their home.

I was thinking about them,
wondering how they survived
on their own, when Julian and
Clarissa suddenly suggested that
we all retire to their house to
hear Ryder read more from
that "marvelously entertaining"
book of his.

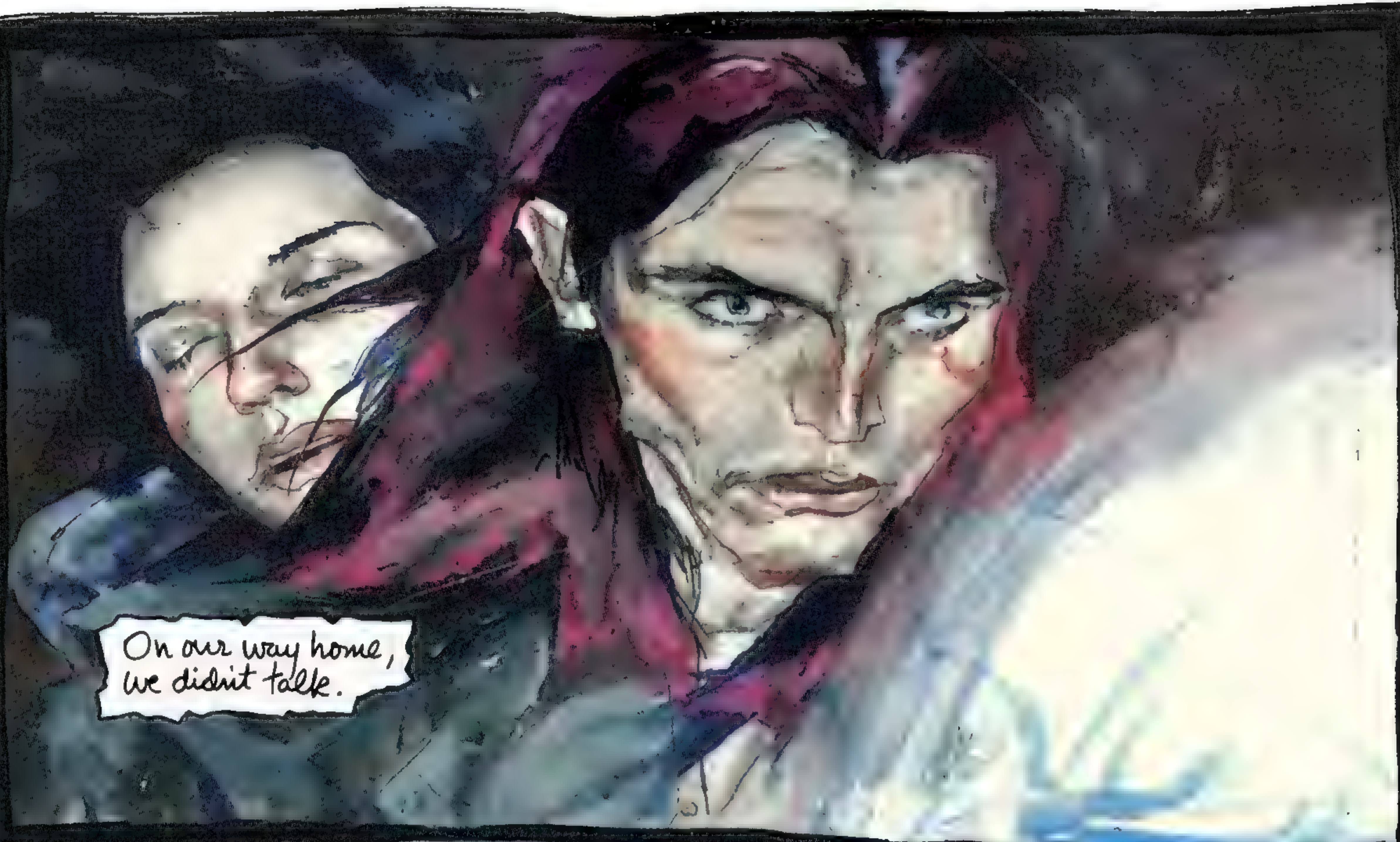
I don't know what
Julian wanted. I think
Clarissa wanted Ryder.

But Ryder said we had to get
back because of Paladin, who
needed to be put back in his
barn for the night.

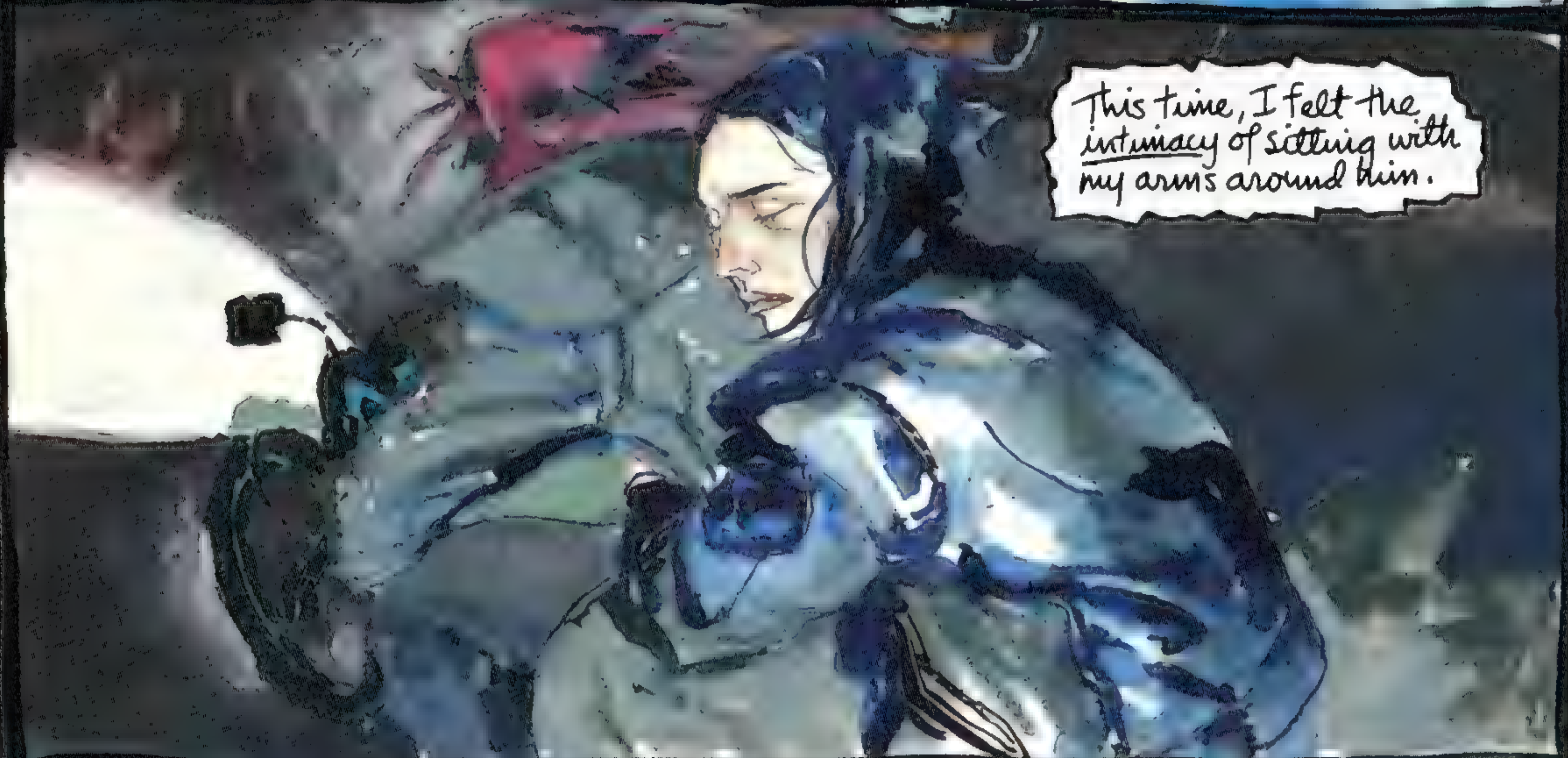
I was relieved
when he said
it:

I thought for a moment
that his caring for the
animal was all a ruse,
that all he wanted was
to sell his wares and be
on his way.

But then he promised
Julian he'd come by in
the morning, and I
wasn't sure what he
wanted.



On our way home,
we didn't talk.



This time, I felt the
intimacy of sitting with
my arms around him.



A false intimacy.

He was a stranger
who'd blown into town
to do some business,
and if I offered more,
he would take it.

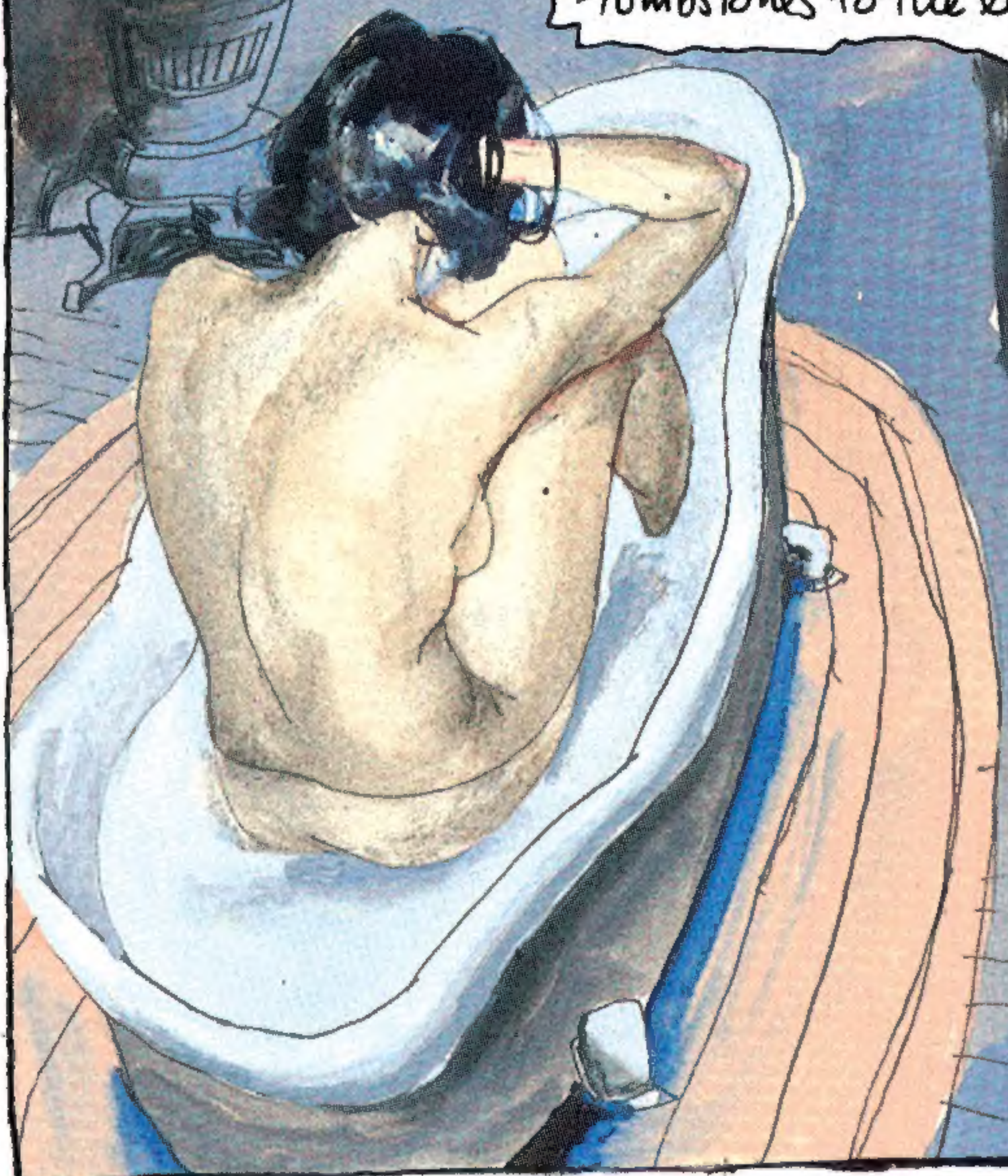


I left him to take care
of Paladin, and to sleep
in the barn.

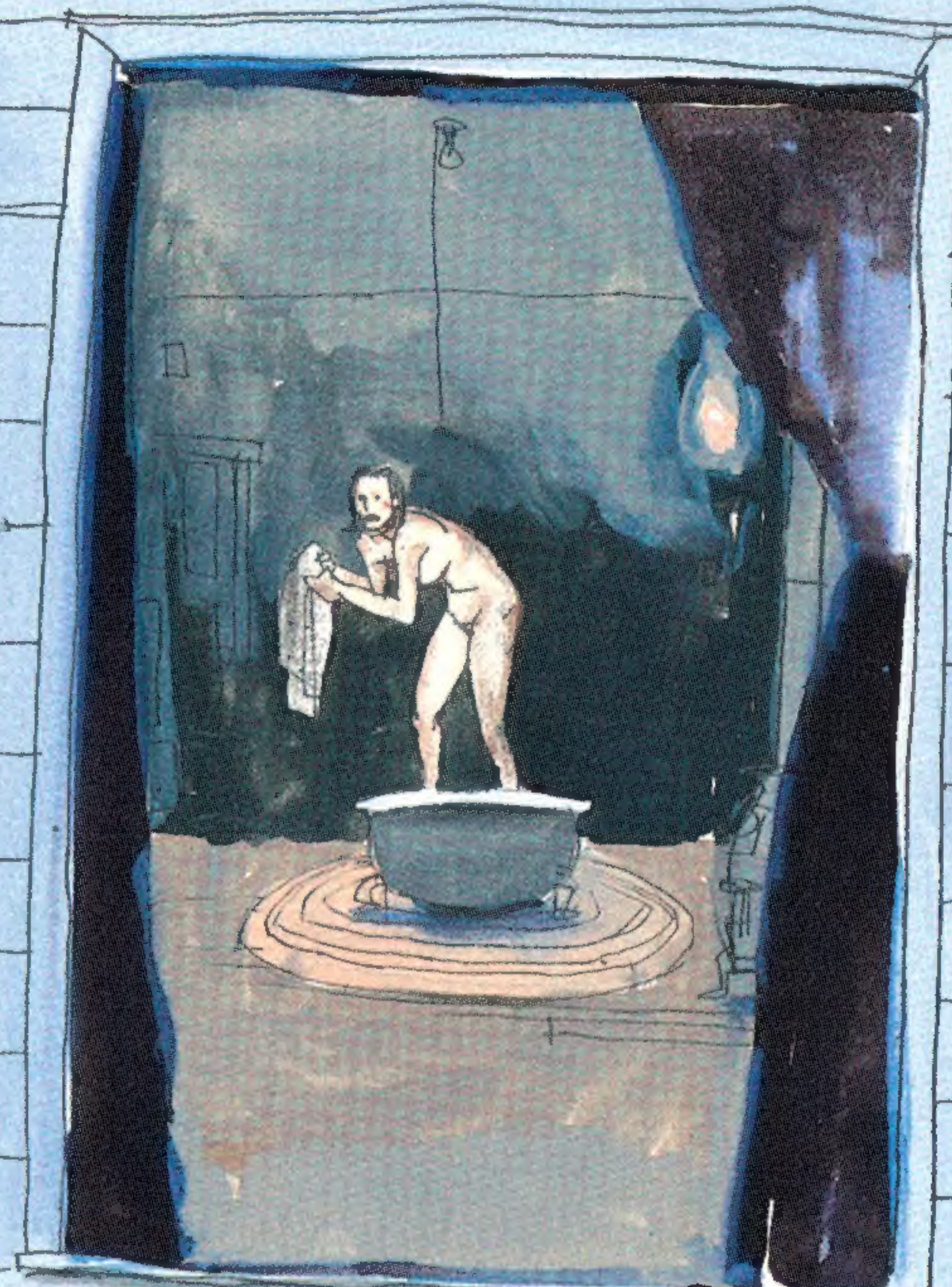
I thought about a young man, locked in a dungeon, imagining he could hear the world crying out to him.



Alone in my house. I thought about a garden outside of time, where statues stood like tombstones to the living.



It was a strange wrinkle in the Oedipus story. I wondered if Ryder had come up with it himself.

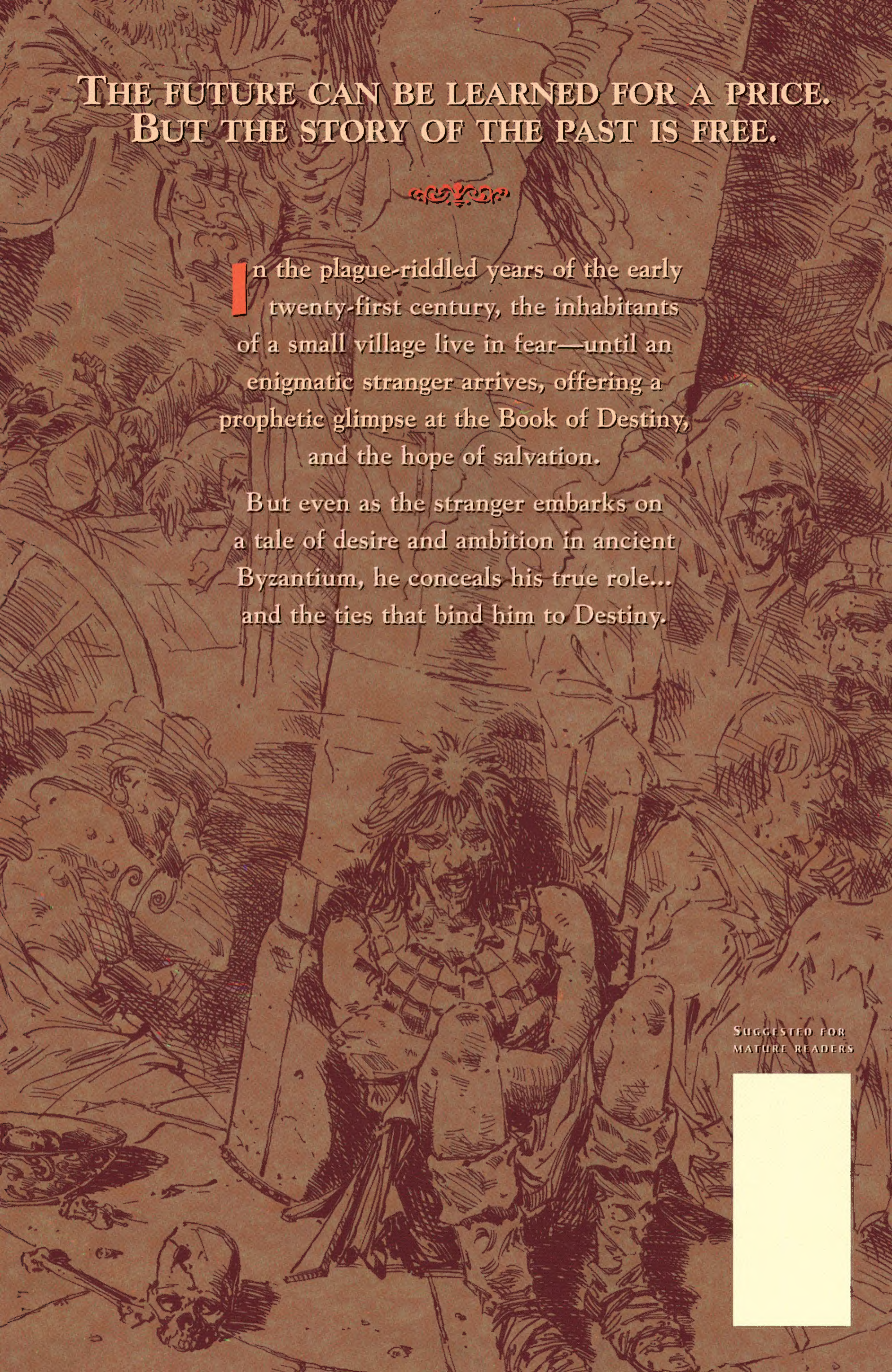


And then I saw something that took my breath away, and realized what I should have seen long ago.

A dark, atmospheric illustration of a person with long red hair riding a white horse. The scene is set at night under a full moon. The landscape is dark and hilly, with a fence visible in the distance. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

He had come for
the horse.

To Be Continued



THE FUTURE CAN BE LEARNED FOR A PRICE.
BUT THE STORY OF THE PAST IS FREE.



In the plague-riddled years of the early twenty-first century, the inhabitants of a small village live in fear—until an enigmatic stranger arrives, offering a prophetic glimpse at the Book of Destiny, and the hope of salvation.

But even as the stranger embarks on a tale of desire and ambition in ancient Byzantium, he conceals his true role... and the ties that bind him to Destiny.

SUGGESTED FOR
MATURE READERS

SON OF ULTRON

"THIS FAN...
THIS MONSTER!"

